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THE COMEDY OF
CATHERINE THE GREAT

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WORKS BY FRANCIS GRIBBLE

MADAME DE STAËL AND HER LOVERS
GEORGE SAND AND HER LOVERS
ROUSSEAU AND THE WOMEN HE LOVED
CHATEAUBRIAND AND HIS COURT OF
WOMEN
THE PASSIONS OF THE FRENCH
ROMANTICS
RACHEL: HER STAGE LIFE AND HER
REAL LIFE
THE LOVE AFFAIRS OF LORD BYRON
THE ROMANTIC LIFE OF SHELLEY





Mr. Green, Sc.

Catherine the Great as a girl

THE COMEDY OF CATHERINE THE GREAT

BY

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"GEORGE SAND AND HER LOVERS" "THE ROMANTIC LIFE OF SHELLEY"
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P R E F A C E

ONE of M. de Vogué's delightful historical essays opens with this passage—

“Have you no stall at the theatre this evening? Or is the play they are giving dull and of indifferent merit? Never mind—for you can easily console yourself if you have any volumes of history on your shelves. They contain the inexhaustible repertory of the great Human Comedy—that masterpiece of pathos and irony which has never ceased to unfold itself since the curtain of the firmament was first raised upon this ancient stage. Works of history are like the statesmen whose proceedings they relate. Viewed from a distance by those who do not really know them, they seem to be of a severe and forbidding gravity, entirely occupied with grandiose designs, worthy of the respect which dwells on the yonder side of boredom. But there is no need to be alarmed either by folios or by potentates. Insinuate yourself into their confidence; strip off their masks; look for what lies beneath their magniloquent phrases and their garb of ceremony. Then

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you will discover that these great companions of yours are of flesh and blood like yourself, and laugh and weep as you do. Life would be infinitely amusing—would it not?—if one could live with no emotion but that of curiosity, always a spectator of the drama, and never an actor in it. Very well. History is only the life which lies behind us, and is therefore free from menace for the looker-on. Like life, it belongs to the unbridled romantic school, devoid of respect for the classical distinctions between different artistic genres. All elements jostle in it—the sublime with the ridiculous—the farcical with the pathetic. You never know how it is going to affect you—whether it will move you to fear or to pity, to laughter or to indignation. Very often it will happen that you will pass through all these emotions in a single moment of time.”

That is how M. de Vogué preludes his narrative of the death of Catherine the Great; and the passage may stand just as appropriately at the head of the story of her Life. At all events, it shall stand here as a description, happily expressed, of the spirit in which the present biography has been undertaken. The object which the biographer has pursued in his perusal of many volumes—some of them undeniably of a severe and forbidding aspect—is simply that Human Comedy which is the one thing of permanent and universal interest in history, though historians

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are apt to overlook it, whether through a mistaken zeal for the dignity of history, or because they need their space for matters concerning which students are more likely to be questioned by examiners.

Let it be freely granted, therefore, that the present contribution to historical biography is not intended "for the Schools," as we say at Oxford, or "for the *Tripos*," as they say at Cambridge. Students who study solely for the purpose of being examined will be far more profitably occupied in perusing the pages of Morfill, of Rambaud, and of the Cambridge Modern History, than in reading what lies between these covers. But a public of students is not the only public which it is permissible for a writer of history to address. There are also those who, while they lack the leisure (and perhaps the inclination) to pore over the texts of treaties, or to follow all the cross currents of past political intrigue, have a keen interest in the drama of history and an equally keen desire to know more of the men and women who have played leading parts in that drama. That is the public to which this book is offered.

It is offered the more earnestly because Catherine's reputation has suffered at least as much from the silence of the discreet and serious as from the reckless slanders of the gossips. While the latter have often assailed her with calumnies which are obviously untrue, the reticence of the former has done a good deal

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to gain those calumnies credence. Morfill, in particular, for example, deliberately and ostentatiously “draws a veil” over levities and scandals at which he darkly hints—so leaving his readers with such an impression as they might get if conducted to the portal of Madame Tussaud’s Chamber of Horrors, and then forbidden to enter on the ground that the sights within were too painful and shocking for them.

Such a policy does not seem to rest upon right reason even when pursued at waxwork shows. It is altogether without justification when our guide is conducting us through the corridors of history. Exciting the reader’s imagination without satisfying his curiosity, it induces him to draw unwarrantable inferences on the ancient principle : *Omne ignotum pro horrifico*. It may be proper to take the risk in the cases in which nothing worse than the truth is likely to be imagined or invented—in such a case, for instance, as that of Tiberius at Capri; but, in the vast majority of cases, such significant and ostentatious discretion only results in creating a misleading and calumnious legend. It has certainly done so in the case of Catherine the Great.

There is a legendary Catherine, summed up in the phrase, “The Messalina of the North.” The implication is that we have only to look up Messalina in the Classical Dictionary in order to know what the ordinary histories do not tell us about Catherine; that while, in her public capacity, she distinguished herself as the most

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illustrious sovereign of her time, her private life was full of unimaginable horrors ; that, if she did not actually procure the murder of her husband and her rivals, she was the sort of woman who would cheerfully have done so ; that the life at her Court was an unceasing round of shameless licentiousness. Her present biographer has even discovered intelligent people under the impression that she was a woman who made a practice of murdering her paramours. When silence has given birth and colour to such slanders, the case for telling the truth hardly needs to be laboured.

The truth is that Catherine was a woman not only of exceptional ability but also of exceptional charm ; and that, if she had to be placed on her defence before a jury of matrons commissioned to judge her by modern moral standards, she would be able to plead, in the language of the criminals who are only criminal through circumstance, that she had “never had a chance.”

Her moral education, such as it was, ceased when she was about fourteen. She was then carried off from her *bourgeois* German home to Russia, and married to a drunken fool, who never felt or showed affection for her, but flaunted his infidelities in her face, and, in the end, threatened to repudiate her and send her to a nunnery. Severed from the associations of her childhood, in a country of which she did not know the language, compelled to conform

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to a strange religion, she found herself, at the impressionable age, in conditions in which she could hardly fail to lose her moral bearings. That the Empress under whose tutelage she lived had lovers was notorious ; and no one about her Court—not even the Court Chaplain—professed to be surprised or shocked. It would have been too much to expect a slip of a girl to hold aloft the banner of Puritanism in such surroundings. Catherine would not have been allowed to do so if she had tried.

A first lover was presently thrown at her head, for dynastic reasons, by the very guardians who had the supervision of her morals. A second lover was, shortly afterwards, thrown at her head, for diplomatic reasons, by the Russian Chancellor, acting in conjunction with the British Ambassador. A third lover eventually became necessary as a protection against the husband who proposed to imprison her in a nunnery. After her husband's death, she would have married this third lover, if her subjects would have let her ; but they told her to her face in the Senate that she was welcome to have “favourites,” but that she must reign without a consort. Our imaginary jury of matrons, placed in possession of these facts, would have to agree that this was a combination of circumstances to which the conventional maxims of morality were irrelevant.

The statement of the facts, however, and the exposition of the circumstances are essential

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to any attempt to rescue Catherine's reputation and reconstruct her personality. She has been damned by silence, sneers, and shrugs of the shoulders. She has nothing to lose, and a great deal to gain, from candid treatment. It is not to be expected that she will emerge from the inquiry with the spotless robes of a saint ; but there will be as little need to array her in the white sheet of the penitent. The superlatives—or a good many of them—will have to go. Catherine will, in the end, appear neither so great as she seemed to Voltaire nor so licentious as she seemed to Laveaux ; but more human—more womanly—than she seemed to either of them. Above all, it is to be hoped, her charm will be made manifest.

To her charm, indeed, the testimony of the witnesses is well-nigh unanimous. There were differences of opinion as to her genius, but few as to her power of pleasing. About that, the lovers in possession agreed with the discarded lovers ; and the opinion which they shared in common was endorsed by Catherine's ladies-in-waiting, ministers, and servants, who wept for her, when she died, as for a mother, and by the Ambassadors from the foreign Courts.

The Ambassadors, it is true, did not always admire without reservation. Their angles of vision were those of their respective nationalities ; and in one case—that of James Harris, first Earl of Malmesbury—the angle of vision was not easily distinguishable from that of Mrs.

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Grundy. The consequence was that the comedy of Catherine's proceedings did not escape their notice. James Harris was shocked by that comedy, much as a bishop might be shocked by a performance of *Pink Dominoes*. His colleagues—and more particularly his French colleagues—smiled at it, but with indulgence. "Weakly sentimental" is the worst epithet that the Chevalier de Corberon could find it in his heart to apply to her.

"Weakly sentimental" she indubitably was; and she grew more and more weakly sentimental as she grew older—as old friends died and disappeared—as the world became "depopulated in her heart," and she was more and more oppressed by a sense of isolation in her grandeur. In the beginning, no doubt, her sentimentalism was a little too ostentatious; and, in the end, it made her rather ridiculous. That will appear as we proceed. But sentiment, however it displays itself, commands a respect which mere gallantry does not command; and when it exhibits itself in comedy, it keeps comedy, however occasionally farcical, on a higher level than farce. It makes sympathy possible; and the Human Comedy makes a wider appeal when it is "sympathetic," even though the scene is laid among the splendours of a Court.

Every student of Catherine's life is bound to confess himself deeply indebted to M. Waliszewski's two long monographs on her

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reign. They are monographs, however, not biographies — collections of essays, not consecutive narratives ; and their existence, therefore, did not seem to present any insuperable reason for abstaining from a fresh attempt to present a full and faithful portrait of Catherine to the English reader. The other authorities used are the various reminiscences of the period, the ambassadorial dispatches recently reprinted by the St. Petersburg Académie des Sciences, and Catherine's own *Memoirs*.

The authenticity of those *Memoirs*, which was for a long time disputed, may be taken to be established by their inclusion in the Russian collected edition of Catherine's writings. The matter now printed incorporates a good deal which was not included in the only text formerly available ; and careful attention has been paid to the material thus added.

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THE COMEDY OF CATHERINE THE GREAT

CHAPTER I

Birth and Parentage—Childhood—The Summons to Russia

GOSSIP used to whisper that the real father of Catherine the Great of Russia was Frederick the Great of Prussia. That, we may take it, is an ætiological myth: an attempt to explain Catherine by means of a worthy, though irregular, heredity; compliment joining hands with calumny in the legend. It is a legend, however, which no tittle of evidence supports; and a serious biographer must sweep past it, merely noting the need felt for it by a world which the genius of Catherine perplexed. Enthusiasts, it would seem, have found it hard to believe that so great and glorious a sovereign could have been the child of a minor German potentate—a “sort of a” prince, described by a French ambassador as “of quite exceptional imbecility”; but that was nevertheless the fact. Catherine (as she was to be rechristened) was the daughter of Prince Christian-Augustus of Anhalt-Zerbst,

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who, at the age of thirty-seven, married Princess Elizabeth of Holstein-Gottorp. Her baptismal names were Augusta-Sophia-Frederica ; her family and intimate friends called her “*Figchen*” ; she was born in 1729.

Probably she was born at Stettin, though the honour has also been claimed for Dornburg ; but that is no great matter. The existence of the mystery is more significant than the solution of it could possibly be. It marks, as scarcely anything else could, the contrast between her obscure origin and her splendid destiny. She was to be an Empress—not merely the consort of an Emperor, but an Empress in her own right, and the most remarkable figure among the rulers of her time ; but her birth attracted so little attention that historians cannot decide for certain which of two small German towns was the scene of it. Such evidence as there is, however, favours Stettin;¹ and it was at Stettin, at all events, that Catherine grew up.

She was nobody in particular, and there was no reason to expect that she ever would be anybody in particular. Her parents stood in pretty much the same relation towards the crowned heads of the period as that in which the so-called “backwoodsmen” of our own House of Lords stand towards those peers who really influence the fortunes of the State. The atmosphere of their home was one of provincialism

¹ Catherine herself states in her *Memoirs* that she was born at Stettin.

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and shabby gentility. The poor relations of royal houses, they associated chiefly with the professional society of the upper middle classes. Their daughter is said to have played in the streets with the daughters of officers and Civil servants. Very likely she did; but we have no particulars—or none worth mentioning. Catherine's recollections of her childhood are not very rich in anecdote, though a picturesque fact or two may be rescued from them.

She remembered, for instance, the marriage of her first governess, Madeleine Cardel, to a lawyer named Colhard, though she was only four at the time: "They gave me too much to drink at the wedding breakfast, with the result that I screamed and said that I wouldn't go to bed unless Mme Colhard let me go to bed with her." She also remembered being saved from a threatened deformity by a bone-setter whom her parents only called in with reluctance because his principal profession was that of public executioner; and another interesting memory is that of her early course of religious instruction, which soon resolved itself into a series of arguments with her instructor, who desired the governess to birch his pupil for refusing to believe that Marcus Aurelius and other great men of antiquity would be damned for their ignorance of the divine revelation.

And then there were certain recollections of certain talks about marriage, not intended for her ears—

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“ (Bolhagen ¹) in the year 1736 was reading the gazette in my room. It contained the news of the marriage of my cousin, Princess Augusta of Saxe-Gotha, to the Prince of Wales, son of King George II. of England; and he said to Mlle Cardel, ‘ That girl, you know, is not nearly so well educated as this child here,—and she isn’t any prettier,—and yet, you see, she’s going to be Queen of England. Who knows what destiny may have in store for our little one ? ’ ”

After that, Catherine says, she began to think and dream of crowns; but the crown which was actually to be hers was regarded as far out of her reach—

“ Sometimes they amused themselves by discussing to whom they would marry me; but when the name of the young Duke of Holstein was mentioned, my mother always said, ‘ Oh no ! He needs a wife whose credit and influence would be useful in supporting his great claims and pretensions. My daughter is not grand enough for him.’ ”

Those anecdotes constitute very nearly the sum total of what Catherine has told us of her younger days. Laveaux, her future husband’s biographer, adds a scandal, crediting her with a lover—a certain mysterious “ Count B—— ”;

¹ A functionary at the little Court.

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but that is rather obviously nonsense—inspired, as one supposes, by the theory that the child must have been mother to the woman, and that coming events must of course have cast shadows before them. It may be dismissed, like the story of her mother's liaison with Frederick the Great, as a legend fabricated because the need was felt for it. Confining ourselves to facts, we find that we know practically nothing except that Catherine was frequently reproved by Mlle Cardel¹ for an awkward habit of sticking out her chin. Beyond that unimportant trait, we only read of certain "displacements": journeys to Eutin, to Zerbst, and even as far as Berlin, where Catherine's portrait was painted.

It is not clear that she knew why it was painted, or for the satisfaction of whose curiosity. There is no reason to suppose that she traced any connection between the painting of that portrait (which was sent as a present to the Empress Elizabeth of Russia) and the sudden, and quite undeserved, promotion of her father to the military rank of Field-Marshal. There were wheels within wheels there; but they revolved invisibly. Catherine was only fourteen—too young to understand, or even to suspect. She knew, of course, that her mother was one of the Russian Empress's "poor relations"; but the Empress had not, so far, shown her family any remarkable kindness, and, even now, she

¹ Babet Cardel, who succeeded to the office vacated by her sister's marriage.

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did not appear to be in any hurry to do so. A year passed ; and, to a child of fourteen, a year seems a very long time. But then, at the end of the year, a strange thing happened suddenly.

The place was Zerbst, and the time was December 1743. The family were keeping Christmas in the festive German style, when a courier galloped to the door, and delivered a letter for the Princess of Anhalt-Zerbst from one Brummer, formerly tutor to the young Duke of Holstein, now the Grand Duke Peter, heir apparent to the Russian crown, and at present his Master of the Court.

The letter was nothing less than an invitation from the Empress to her poor relation, expressed, of course, almost as a command. Princess Elizabeth was to come to Russia at once, and present herself at the Court, whether it happened to be at St. Petersburg or at Moscow ; and she was to bring her daughter with her. Her husband must, on no account, be of the party ; and she must dispense with all preparations which would involve delay. A lady-in-waiting, a couple of maids, an equerry, a cook, and a footman or two—that was all the escort she would need. Whatever else she required would be provided for her when she reached Riga. A draft on a German bank to defray the cost of the journey was enclosed ; and she was strictly enjoined not to gossip as to its object. If she felt it absolutely necessary to confide in some one, then she might confide in Frederick the Great,

THE SUMMONS TO RUSSIA

who was in the secret, and would be able to give further information.

An astounding letter truly to burst upon a quiet Christmas party in a German provincial town ! It was followed, after an interval of only two hours, by a second letter, not less amazing, also delivered by special courier, from Frederick himself, supplying the additional information which the first letter had promised. The journey, Frederick explained, had matrimony for its goal. Catherine (or Sophia, as she was then called) was to go to Russia to be betrothed to the heir to the Russian throne—that Grand Duke for whom her mother had supposed her “not grand enough.” That was why the portrait had been painted, and that was why Prince Christian-Augustus had been made a Field-Marshal. The wires, in short, had been carefully pulled ; and the end to which they had been pulled was now in sight. The invitation of the Empress must be regarded as a command, and obeyed.

That was the dramatic end of Catherine’s girlhood. She tells us that she divined the cause of her parents’ excitement before it was communicated to her, and that she astonished her mother by handing her a sheet of paper on which she had written the couplet—

“ Augure de tout
Que Pierre III sera ton époux.”

But that is as it may be ; for Catherine’s retrospective imagination was rather riotous, and she

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was very fond of fancying that she had had early premonitions of her glory. Her destiny, at any rate, was planned for her without reference to her inclinations ; and already, when barely fifteen, she was treated as a pawn in the game of the diplomatists—albeit a pawn which was presently to be queened and to dominate the board.

That said, we must pause to examine the conditions of the board and the circumstances which had caused the new piece to be brought into play.

CHAPTER II

Arrival in Russia—Betrothal to the Grand Duke Peter

THE Russian Succession, in the first half of the eighteenth century, may be said to have depended upon rules which were uniformly broken. The rule was that the reigning sovereign nominated a member of his family to succeed him; the machinery for breaking the rule was a Palace Revolution. A usurper, male or female, corrupted the Imperial Guard, marched on the Palace,—preferably at the dead of night,—murdered or arrested the Tsar (or Regent), and proceeded to rule in his place. Such acts of violence were almost as frequent as general elections in England at the present time, and were regarded as natural incidents in the rough-and-tumble of family quarrels. The silent millions of the Russian people had no concern with them, but acquiesced apathetically in the results.

The Empress Elizabeth, the only surviving daughter of Peter the Great, attained the throne, through such a revolution, at the age of thirty-two, in 1741. The Tsar Ivan vi.,

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a minor, was locked up in the fortress of Schlüsselburg. His mother and guardian, the Grand Duchess Anne Leopoldovna, together with her husband, Prince Anton-Ulrich of Brunswick, was sent to live in a small town on the shores of the White Sea ; and Elizabeth proceeded, according to the rules of the game, to select an heir among her kindred.

It is hardly likely that she played the game for her amusement, or even for the satisfaction of her personal ambition. According to the most credible witnesses, she was a weak, vain woman, not without charm, but at once superstitious and frivolous, equally addicted to long prayers, lovers, and luxury. Her very weakness, however, made her a convenient instrument in the hands of the intriguers who desired the revolution. The German influences at the Court had been too strong to please them. Tired of being exploited by Germans, they put Elizabeth forward as the representative of the patriotic Russian interest, and triumphed in her name. Their German enemies—Ostermann, Munnich, and the rest—were marched off to Siberia ; and Elizabeth, having no child of her own,—none, at all events, whom she could acknowledge,—named as her successor her nephew, Peter-Ulrich, son of her sister Anna, who had married Karl-Frederick of Holstein-Gottorp. This youth, then fourteen years of age, was fetched from Kiel to St. Petersburg in 1742, and was known thenceforward as the Grand Duke Peter.

BETROTHAL

Young though he was, the question of finding a wife for him was almost immediately raised ; and the starting of it set the wire-pullers to work in the principal European Chancelleries.

Bestuchef, the Russian Chancellor, desired an alliance which should combine the interests of Russia, Saxony, Austria, Holland, and Great Britain against those of France and Prussia ; but France and Prussia also had something to say in the matter, and had their supporters at the Russian Court. We need not enter into all the details of their machinations—it suffices to relate the issue of them. French, Saxon, Polish, and Prussian princesses were successively proposed and rejected. It was represented that the religious difficulty would be less with a Lutheran than with a Catholic princess. It was also represented that, the less important the princess selected, the more amenable the Russians would be likely to find her. Then, after the way had thus been paved, Frederick the Great pressed the claims of his own candidate : the only surviving daughter of Prince Christian of Anhalt-Zerbst.

There, of course, we see quite clearly the inwardness alike of Prince Christian's unmerited preferment to the rank of Field-Marshal and of the painting of his daughter's portrait. Princess Sophia had been brought up as a Lutheran ; she might fairly have been described, at that date, as the least of all the princesses ; and her

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appearance was attractive. Probably, when the issue was hanging in the balance, her personal attractiveness decided it; for that was a consideration to which, rightly or wrongly, more weight was attached in Russia than at the other Courts of Europe—a point which may be illustrated by the strange story of the choice of a bride by the Tsar Michael.

When Michael made up his mind to marry, he organised a kind of beauty show at the Palace. All the marriageable daughters of the nobility then in Moscow were summoned to the Imperial presence and instructed to bring their night-dresses. A large dormitory was provided for them, and they were put to bed in a row. In the course of the night, the Tsar, accompanied by his mother, made a tour of the dormitory. The charms of the sleepers were duly considered and compared, and the most desirable of them was selected and married, in spite of the fact that she was poor and of humble station. This ceremony, which took place in the middle of the seventeenth century, and is gravely recorded by a serious Russian historian, is a valuable piece of evidence as to the position of women in Russia, and not, perhaps, without significance as a precedent for the choice of the humble Princess of Anhalt-Zerbst as the consort of the Russian heir apparent.

At all events, the choice did fall on her—and fell with the dramatic suddenness which

BETROTHAL

we have seen : a courier galloping to the door, and a transformation akin to that effected in the lot of Cinderella by the magic wand of the fairy godmother. Splendours, she was assured, such as she had never dreamed of awaited her as soon as she crossed the frontier. She must make haste—make haste. Messenger after messenger arrived, urging her to lose no time ; and her mother was a woman who could be trusted, in such a case, to see to it that no time was lost. The summons arrived, as we have seen, at Christmas 1743 ; the date of the departure was 10th January 1744. Catherine was not yet fifteen—still in the schoolroom, and with an unstocked wardrobe. Her outfit consisted of “two or three dresses, twelve chemises, and an equal number of stockings and pocket-handkerchiefs.” The notables of Zerbst are said to have assembled to wish her luck in her great adventure ; and she is said to have announced her resolve to “reign alone over this great Empire.” But these are stories in which one once more suspects the imaginative handiwork of the mythologist.

Berlin, where the girl arrived without even a Court dress, was the first stage ; and the second was Schwedt on the Oder. There Catherine parted from her father, whom she was never to see again ; and his last paternal act was to hand her a roll of manuscript containing his hints for her deportment at the Russian Court. He exhorted his daughter to order herself lowly

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and reverently to all her betters ; to try her hardest to make her husband happy ; to be careful with her money ; not to get into debt or to concern herself with politics ; not to allow any friend to be on too intimate terms with her. It is pretty much the advice which any father of modest station might have given to any daughter whose marriage was about to promote her to embarrassing and unfamiliar grandeur. It is quite authentic ; and there is no reason whatever to suspect irony in the daughter's recorded expression of thanks for it. She was only fourteen, and irony is not an attribute of that tender age.

She drove on, with her mother, through Memel, along the road to Riga—travelling post, and travelling quite as uncomfortably as lowlier persons. The roads were shocking, and the inns were worse. Six horses had to be hired for each of the four lumbering carriages—not for the sake of grandeur, but simply to avoid sticking in the mud. The guest chambers in which the travellers slept at the post stations were like so many pigsties. It was as if the journey itself were an allegory designed to illustrate and emphasise the coming transition in the bride's fortunes.

That transition began at Mittau, and was completed at Riga, where the caravan arrived on 6th February. There banquets were spread, and a suite of luxurious apartments was ready, and officers in splendid uniforms, glittering with

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orders, knelt to kiss hands ; and the rest of the journey was a triumphal procession, escorted by a detachment of the Holstein regiment of cuirassiers, and attended by servants of every grade and description : butlers, and cooks, and confectioners—including a special cook to make the coffee ; footmen, and grooms, and farriers. The sledge in which the travellers rode was scarlet, and was lined with fur. They lay at full length in it on silk mattresses, resting their heads on damask pillows, with a satin coverlet drawn over them. And so to St. Petersburg, and thence, following the Court in its migration, to Moscow, drawn, on the last day, by sixteen horses, taking the last stages at a headlong gallop, and covering the last fifty miles in a short three hours, until they clattered into the court of the Wooden Palace, where courtiers bowed low, and soldiers presented arms, and the Grand Duke Peter, in his impatience, gave them no time to change their travelling dresses, but there and then embraced his promised bride—“most affectionately,” as her mother reported to her father.

He was not yet quite sixteen, so that his impatience accorded with his years. The portrait, it is evident, had made the desired impression ; and the impression was not belied by the reality. One may fairly use the hackneyed expression, and say that “all went merrily as a marriage bell”—for the first few weeks, at all events. “We are living like

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queens," the Princess of Zerbst reported to her husband. As for her daughter—"the Empress is most kind to her, and the heir apparent is madly in love with her." But her daughter's *Reminiscences* cannot be said to echo the enthusiasm. She speaks of herself as the slave of duty, and complains of her fiancé's lack of ardour. "All girls," she protests, "however carefully brought up, like compliments and expressions of tenderness." She did not hear any ; she was too proud to take the initiative in the matter ; so she consoled herself by "playing games" with her attendants.

Meanwhile, however, she allowed herself to be "converted" ; and she preserved to the end of her life a keen sense of the ease with which such changes of the heart could be effected. "It can be done in a fortnight," she said when it was necessary to convert the bride selected for her own son ; which sounds cynical, but is not altogether without plausibility—for if reason, as the religious tell us, has nothing to do with the choice of a creed, it is hard to say what considerations save those of convenience remain to be consulted. And Catherine, at any rate, delighted all truly religious Russians by preferring an Orthodox priest to a Lutheran pastor when she fell ill and was assumed to need spiritual comfort. Possibly that scene was arranged for her by her elders, with an eye to effect ; but the effect was indubitably produced.

Her illness was pleurisy ; and her recovery

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was almost miraculous, for she was bled sixteen times in a month. Her pallor, when she began to be convalescent, so impressed the Empress that she sent her a pot of rouge, with her compliments and an injunction to use plenty of it. The Grand Duke himself soon afterwards fell ill,—first with measles, and then with smallpox,—and emerged from the sick-room deeply pock-marked, and with a shaven head, covered with a gigantic and ludicrous wig. The transformation was not, of course, particularly favourable to romance; and Catherine is said to have fainted with horror at the spectacle. A girl young enough, as she then was, to find her chief pleasure in playing blind man's buff with her ladies-in-waiting may very well have done so. But this painful change in the personal appearance of her future husband was not her only trouble. It coincided with the discovery that Peter was a young barbarian with the manners of an unlicked cub.

There were other annoyances. Her mother was fussy; the Empress was capricious. Catherine was reprimanded for running into debt, for staying out too late in the Palace grounds, for living on too familiar terms with the least desirable of the ladies placed in attendance on her. She was also worried by Palace jealousies and intrigues, the inwardness of which she was too young to understand. All that, however, was only the ordinary trouble of a high-spirited schoolgirl, prematurely launched

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in adult society. She could have laughed her way lightly through it if she had been in love and had looked forward with delighted anticipation to her wedding day. But she was not in love, and it would be idle to argue that she ought to have been. No other girl would have been likely to love Peter any more than she loved him. Peter was, as we have said, an unlicked cub ; and Catherine's *Memoirs* furnish us with abundant particulars to support that charge.

Peter, as Catherine paints him for us, was at once a big baby and a precocious roué. One of his first confidences to his young fiancée related to an “affair” with one of the Empress's maids-of-honour, who had, he said, been banished to Siberia for his sake. That, it seems, was his cubbish way of acting on the motto : *Se faire valoir*. For the rest, he was of a temper alternately violent and sulky, addicted to practical jokes in the society of ladies, spent most of his time in playing at soldiers with his valets, and a good deal of the rest of it in playing with dolls and other toys. So that—

“ As my wedding day approached, I grew more and more melancholy. My heart told me that I should derive no happiness from my marriage ; but ambition sufficed to sustain me. In the depths of my heart I felt the premonition that, some day, sooner or later, I should be the sole sovereign ruler of the Russian Empire.”

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So she is said to have reflected ; while Lord Hyndford, the British Ambassador, wrote home for “some English stuffs,” suitable for wedding presents, remarking that “when one has to do with ladies, one must have something in the female way.” We need not believe all that she tells us about her ambitions and her confidence that they would be realised, but we can hardly help believing some of it. She was only fifteen ; she had been placed in a position from which there was no drawing back ; and she had to reconcile herself to it somehow. No doubt she sought her consolation (whether she found it or not) by thinking of the throne, and trying to forget the loutish heir to it.

CHAPTER III

Marriage—Unpleasant character of the Grand Duke—
Flirtation with Andrew Czernichef

“THEIR imperial highnesses,” writes the British Ambassador, “were married on August 21. The procession was the most magnificent that ever was known in this country, and surpassed anything I ever saw.” The bride, he might have added, was only sixteen, and the bridegroom only seventeen years of age.

The latter’s character was already formed, for it was the sort of character that does not take much forming. He was a half-baked, ill-conditioned lout, and was to remain a half-baked, ill-conditioned lout until the end. Catherine, on the contrary, was a high-spirited schoolgirl, but with possibilities of ardour, intellect, and character unsuspected as yet either by herself or by any of those about her. She had begun to read, and discovered that she liked reading. The time was soon to come when she would always have a book in her pocket or under her pillow, except when she had one in her hand. Beginning with fiction,

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she quickly passed to history and philosophy. It is not clear whether she preferred Bayle's *Dictionary*, Madame de Sévigné's *Letters*, or Brantôme's *Dames Galantes*. She studied all three authors, and each of them influenced her in some degree. No doubt she came the more easily under their influence because of the dullness of her life.

She and her husband soon, and for some time, found themselves the objects of a kind of persecution brought upon them by no fault of their own. Their marriage had represented a temporary triumph of German influence at the Russian Court, and had been concluded in spite of the wishes of Bestuchef, the Chancellor already mentioned, who represented the national Russian party. This eclipse of Bestuchef, however, was only of brief duration. He soon reasserted himself as the power behind the throne, an autocrat whose motto was "Russia for the Russians," with its corollary that the proper place for Germans was Germany. He could not, of course, send Peter back to Holstein-Gottorp, or dismiss Catherine to Anhalt-Zerbst ; but he could, at least, hurry Catherine's mother home, get rid of the Germans in her suite, forbid both her and Peter to communicate with Germany, and surround them with creatures of his own, commissioned to spy upon their actions and report to him.

That was his policy, and he was ruthless and thorough in the execution of it. One by one,

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all the foreigners attached, in whatever capacity, to the grand-ducal household were dismissed ; and all persons, whether strangers or natives, supposed to be sympathetic to them were eliminated from their entourage—some of them even finding their way, on one pretext or another, to prison or to exile. Nor was that all. It was further intimated to Catherine that she must not correspond with her German relatives—not even with her mother. All her letters home were to be composed for her at the Foreign Office by Bestuchef's clerks, and she was to do nothing but append her signature. Only by treating her as a child, Bestuchef thought, was it possible to make her a good Russian.

Peter, it appears, was hardly, if at all, perturbed. He had his own interests : his dogs, his horses, his mistresses, his toys, his games of soldiers ; and with these recreations there was no attempt to interfere. He also liked to get drunk, and had ample opportunities of doing so. Deeply attached to his vices, he was indifferent to the nationality of his boon companions, as is the way of those whose senses are blunted by strong drink. Catherine, on the other hand, felt the cruelty alike of her enforced isolation and of the enforced companionship of chaperons whom she could not trust, and with whose language even she was as yet imperfectly acquainted. She had come to Russia, doubtless, with the Western view of Russians : as incapable of distinguishing an individual

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Russian, different from other Russians, as the average European is of recognising that any individual Chinaman differs from other Chinamen. She was to learn to do so—she was already learning; but the process of education was painful. Her position, in truth, was very much like that of a girl sent to a foreign boarding school, falling into disgrace for reasons which are not explained to her, eyed with obtrusive suspicion, and never able to escape from the prying gaze of governesses.

Her life, as she depicts it for us in her *Memoirs*, was inexpressibly tedious: nothing but a weary round of journeys from palace to palace; of interminable devotional exercises at the devotional seasons; of monotonous Court functions and card-parties. All this, year in year out, for many years, without any of those opportunities of gay *abandon* which are the privilege of the irresponsible, without a companion who spoke her own language or had a soul above the routine of rites and ceremonies, and also without—or very nearly without—the occasional relief of privacy. All this, moreover, in the company of such a husband as Peter was now proving himself to be.

How Peter impressed his child-wife before marriage we have already seen. How he disgusted her afterwards innumerable passages in the *Memoirs* demonstrate. The memory of his unpleasant habits clung to Catherine and sickened her for years. She portrays him as at

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once a fool and a boisterous buffoon. His least objectionable recreation was to lie in bed and play with toys. He also compelled his wife to play cards with him for hours at a time, sulked when he lost, but insisted that the money should be instantly handed over when he won. At other times he diverted himself by pacing Catherine's boudoir, cracking a whip at the servants. But the most offensive of all his offences consisted in keeping a pack of hounds in the room adjoining the bridal chamber, so that the noise of their yapping was always in Catherine's ears, and their stench always in her nostrils. She returns to the subject several times, this being her first reference to it—

“The Grand Duke got his pack together while we were in the country, and set to work to train the hounds himself. When he was tired of teasing them, he scraped on a fiddle for a change. He did not know a note of music, but he had a fairly good ear, and supposed that the charm of music consisted solely in the violence with which the instrument was handled. Those who heard him would gladly have stopped their ears with cotton-wool if they had dared. . . . This mode of life was continuous alike in the country and in town.”

And then, on a subsequent page—

“Our principal nuisance, morning, noon, and nearly all night, was as follows. The Grand

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Duke trained his hounds with remarkable perseverance, lashing at them with his whip, yelling at them after the manner of huntsmen, and chasing them from one of his two rooms to the other. Those of the hounds that got tired, and tried to desist from the game, were pitilessly whipped, and so yelled and howled louder than ever. When he wearied of this amusement, which was an unconscionable nuisance to the ears and tranquillity of those about him, he used to take a fiddle and scrape it, very loudly and very much out of tune, walking up and down the room the while—returning ultimately to the training of his hounds, thrashing them in the most cruel style. . . . Once, hearing a poor hound yelling horrible, I opened the door of my room, which adjoined that in which these proceedings were taking place, and pleaded for the poor beast; but that only caused the blows to be rained with redoubled vigour. Unable to bear the cruel sight, I withdrew to my bedroom, crying; but my tears, instead of moving the Grand Duke to pity, only made him more angry. Pity was an emotion for which there was no room in his soul.”

Even in the annals of the most discordant royal marriages one would not easily discover a parallel to that picture. One cannot help feeling for Catherine as much pity as she felt for the hounds; and if the stock objection should be taken to it that one story is good until another

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is told, one can confirm the general impression, if not all the details, from other sources. It was at about this time that Peter was assigned a tutor to help him to mend his manners ; and the tutor's memorandum of instructions, which has been preserved, specifies the various particulars in which his manners require amendment. His Imperial Highness, the memorandum sets forth, must be taught not to make ugly faces at people, not to hold indecorous conversations with his inferiors, and not to empty his wine-glass over the heads of the footmen who wait at table. One infers from that sober document as readily as from Catherine's more vivacious reminiscences the sort of unmannerly lout that Peter was ; and one can sympathise with Catherine's feelings when she too was given a monitress, commissioned to exhort her to " be more tolerant of her husband's tastes ; to make herself more agreeable to him ; to display affection and even passion ; and, in short, to employ all means in her power to win his tender regard, and accomplish her conjugal duty."

The exhortation was obviously evoked by Catherine's failure, after the lapse of what seemed a reasonable time, to give the throne an heir ; and measures were, in fact, taken to determine whether it was she who was sterile or her husband who was incapable of paternity. The order arrived one day—conveyed curiously enough by a lady-in-waiting—that the Empress

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desired the Grand Duke to take a bath. Peter objected. He had never had a bath in his life, he said, and he did not mean to have one now. He was quite sure that a bath would be bad for his health ; it might even be fatal ; at any rate, he proposed to run no risks. The lady-in-waiting insisted, declaring that, if he did not have a bath, the Empress would cause him to be imprisoned in a fortress ; but Peter burst into tears of rage, declaring that he would show the Empress that he was not a baby, and must not be treated like one ; and Catherine, in whose presence the scene occurred, continues, explaining the significance of the order—

“ At last she left us, announcing that she would report the conversation verbatim to Her Majesty. I don’t know what she made of it, but presently she came back, and changed her tone, saying that the Empress was very angry that we had no children, and that she proposed to solve the mystery with the help of a doctor and a midwife.”

Evidently, therefore, Peter had some reason to expect that the doctor would visit him in the bath, and had refused to repair to it chiefly for that reason. His obstinacy prevailed, and the mystery remained unsolved. Very likely there was no mystery at all, and no explanation other than mutual incompatibility. “ If,” Catherine writes, “ the Grand Duke had desired

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me to love him, I could have done so, for it was my natural inclination to obey duties of that kind”—a profession which one has no difficulty in believing. But the Grand Duke had not desired it. On the contrary, he had preferred to regale his wife with talk about the superior charms of other women. There is no need to give a list of them; but no less than seven are enumerated by the biographers, and one story may be cited as typical of all—

“The Grand Duke,” says Catherine, “was very much attracted, especially when he had drunk too much, as he did every day of his life, by the Princess of Courland. He never quitted her side; he never spoke to any one but her. In short, his preference for her was so notorious as to shock my vanity at the thought that such a hideous little monster was my successful rival. One day, when I rose from the dinner-table, Mme Vladislava told me that every one was distressed to see this hunchback preferred to me. ‘What am I to do?’ I replied; and I went to bed in tears. Hardly had I got to sleep when the Grand Duke came to bed too. Being drunk, and not knowing what he was doing, he proceeded to entertain me with talk about the superlative attractions of his mistress. I pretended to be fast asleep, hoping thus to induce him to keep quiet. He only spoke the louder, in order to wake me up; and when I showed no sign of waking, he banged me

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in the ribs with his fists, grumbled at me for sleeping so soundly, and then turned round and began to snore."

That no family was born to parents so disposed towards each other is no matter for extreme astonishment. Perhaps the Empress presently realised as much; and that may be the significance of Catherine's statement that "nothing more was said about requiring the Grand Duke to take a bath." A letter from Peter to Catherine, printed as an appendix to the Russian translation of the *Memoirs*, in which, as early as 1746, he excuses himself from sharing her apartment on the ground that "the bed is too narrow," may also be regarded as pointing to that conclusion. Husband and wife evidently ceased very soon after their union to live on conjugal terms; so we may leave that branch of the subject, and consider the question of Catherine's own deportment.

Her monitress—Mme Choglokof—was not appointed solely for the purpose of exhorting her to be more affectionate to Peter. The memorandum of instructions also represented that Catherine neglected her religious duties, tried to interfere with public affairs, and was unduly familiar in her manner with the officers attached to the Court. Seeing that she was only seventeen, her interference with the affairs of State cannot have amounted to a great deal; but she was not, of course, at that age,

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too young to flirt. Our question is : Was there any case against her ?

If we could believe Laveaux, we should have to say that there was not one case only, but a long list of cases. Laveaux draws a picture of Catherine and one of her attendant ladies leaning out of the Palace window together, and becoming comprehensively amorous of an entire regiment of Life Guardsmen. He tells us that Catherine and this same maid-of-honour sallied from the Palace night after night, in disguise, and kept appointments with lovers to whom they never revealed their identity. He further revives the story of the mysterious Count B——, already introduced by him as Catherine's lover at Stettin. Count B——, he says, followed Catherine to St. Petersburg, was caught by Peter trying to force the door of her apartment, and was arrested and banished to Siberia, without trial, by Administrative Order.

Those stories, however, are very obviously fables, invented by a biographer who wanted to make out a case for Peter. There is no evidence whatever that Catherine, as yet, sought such adventures ; and there is plenty of evidence that she was too closely watched to have any chance of pursuing them. All that is authentic is that she flirted—very mildly ; that she was caught out in her very first flirtation ; and that she was promptly placed under very strict supervision. It is not much of a story, but one must tell it.

FLIRTATION

The hero of it was a certain Andrew Czernichef, a dashing young Guardsman, as enterprising as he was dashing. It seems that he had received some encouragement—not much, perhaps, but still enough to encourage him. He had admired Catherine before her marriage—and Catherine liked admiration; but the affair had been noticed and nipped in the bud. Andrew had received a friendly hint from a high quarter to the effect that he had better fall ill and apply for leave of absence. Otherwise—

He had taken the hint without requiring the i's to be dotted; but now that Catherine was safely married, he had been allowed to return to the post of duty—and inclination—in the Summer Palace. He was on guard there, in the great hall, just then in the hands of painters and decorators, on which Catherine's room opened. For once in her life—it was a thing which was rarely allowed to happen—Catherine was alone. She opened the door, looked out, and caught sight of her handsome young admirer—

“I beckoned to him,” she writes, “and he came to the door—very nervously, I am bound to say. I asked him if the Empress was likely to be passing. ‘I can’t hear you speak,’ he said. ‘There is too much noise here. Let me come inside.’ ‘Certainly not,’ I replied. He was outside the door, and I was inside; but I was holding the door a little way

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open and speaking through the aperture. Turning my head with an involuntary movement, I saw behind me, close to the door of my dressing-room, the Court Chamberlain, Count Divier. ‘Madame,’ he said, ‘the Grand Duke wants you.’”

No more—apparently—than that; but the Court Chamberlain was a spy and a tale-bearer. He reported what he had seen, and Catherine heard of the matter from her confessor. Was it true, the priest asked her, that she had kissed Czernichef? “It is a calumny, my father,” she replied. “Then you had better be careful, my child, not to give calumny an opening,” was the rejoinder; but there were also penalties to be paid. Andrew Czernichef was sent to prison—though not for very long; and Catherine was given a chaperon—the Mme Choglokof of whom we have spoken. She was allowed thenceforward to go nowhere without Mme Choglokof in attendance; no one was admitted to her apartments without leave from Mme Choglokof; and Mme Choglokof lectured her on etiquette from morning to night, saying continually, “You mustn’t behave like that—the Empress wouldn’t like it.”

Such were the unfortunate and unpleasant beginnings of Catherine’s married life.

CHAPTER IV

Tribulations of Married Life—Restrictions on Liberty—Flirtations with Zachar Czernichef—Introduction of Soltikof—Birth of an Heir

THE supervision, which had been tolerably strict from the first, became stricter than ever after the installation of Mme Chogloko^f as chaperon; and it applied to Peter as well as Catherine. They lived in a gilded cage—none too brilliantly gilded—enjoying less liberty than is, as a rule, allowed to school-children, and no more scope for the play of their individualities than if they had been fowls in a poultry-run. That, at all events, was the theory; and, for some time, it was the practice also. It was to relieve the consequent tedium that Peter established his pack of hounds in the apartment adjoining his wife's bedroom. We know already what Catherine thought of that; and she has left us a graphic picture of the ways in which Peter bored her when he was not occupied either with his hounds or with his fiddle—

“The Grand Duke,” she writes, “never entered my room except for the purpose of pacing up and down it, talking to me of matters

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which, no doubt, interested him, but had no interest whatever for me. He used to do this for hours at a time, and several times a day. I had to pace the room with him until I sank from exhaustion. I had to listen to him attentively and reply to him, though he generally talked the most insufferable nonsense."

He had some wild idea, it seemed, of building himself a pleasure-house, on the lines of a convent,—a sort of Thelema, as it were,—at Oranienbaum. All the inmates were to wear the Capucin habit, bring their own provisions, and draw their own water from the well. The notion was no passing fancy, but a fixed idea on which he enlarged daily, for a whole winter, in the style of a child planning an excursion to a desert island. "It bored me to extinction," Catherine says. "I never knew anything so stupid. When he left me, it was a delightful relief to turn even to the most tedious book."

Such was the daily round; and if we are to understand Catherine, and do her justice, we must realise it. She had intelligence, character, vivacity; she was at the age at which the joy of life is keen. Though she was only in her teens, she was far cleverer than any one in the circle fixed about her; and she was not allowed to have a word to say in the choice of her companions. Her feelings must have been pretty much what those of an undergraduate would be if he were sent back to a

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dame school and never allowed out of sight of the governesses. We need not credit her with any consciousness of genius, or any expectations of the coming glories ; but we may feel quite sure that she resented the treatment—felt herself misunderstood and “put upon”—and looked forward to diverting herself when the hour sounded for her emancipation.

And her emancipation, of course, though it might be delayed, was bound to come, and came. No sudden, or revolutionary, transition brought it ; but it arrived by degrees, through the mere efflux of time. A prisoner may be kept in prison for ever ; but a princess—especially if she be a princess of charm, character, and intelligence—cannot be confined for ever in a gilded cage. She grows up and asserts herself ; she pushes against the barriers, and they yield, little by little, until they give way altogether. The vigilance of guardians relaxes ; and the Palace becomes less and less like a glorified poultry-run.

It was so in this case. The discipline which was possible when Catherine was in her teens was no longer possible when she was in the twenties. Her settled destiny, after all, was to be the consort of an Emperor of Russia. Other people besides herself—the guardians in charge of her among the rest—realised that ; and the knowledge influenced their behaviour. It must have influenced them the more because of their perception that Catherine had a force

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of character which would have to be reckoned with whenever she attained to a position of independent initiative ; and her charm must also have counted, making friends for her who resented her treatment on her behalf, and might some day have the power of making things disagreeable for her enemies. She was not only fascinating to men, but gracious and friendly to women—sympathetic alike to both equals and inferiors. So, though we can lay our fingers on no definite incident, we find that, as the time passed, she gradually acquired more freedom of movement and a larger circle of acquaintances.

That end was gained chiefly by the conciliation of her chaperon. Mme Choglokof had a husband who betrayed the trust reposed in him by making love to Catherine ; and Catherine rejected his advances. She says that she did so less from elevated principles than because he was ugly and stupid ; but it is not impossible that tact and prudence were also considerations which weighed with her. At all events, she behaved with tact, earning Mme Choglokof's gratitude by the propriety of her conduct, while, at the same time, keeping M. Choglokof in a good temper by not leaving him entirely without hope. The result was that husband and wife agreed to strain points in order to make things more pleasant for her, with the result that presently opportunities for flirtation once more presented themselves.

FLIRTATION

The next flirtation was with Zachar Czernichef, a brother of the Andrew Czernichef whom we have seen detected conversing with Catherine through her half-opened bedroom door. Zachar, like Andrew, was a dashing young Guardsman, whose duty brought him to the Palace. He "made the running" quickly by telling Catherine that she was beautiful. "It was the first time," she writes, "that anyone had paid me such a compliment. I rather liked it, and, what is more, I believed it." After that, they corresponded by means of "devises,"—rhymes and mottoes, that is to say, such as are incorporated, nowadays, in Christmas crackers,—Princess Gargarin playing the part of postman. This interchange of sentimental couplets was succeeded by an interchange of sentimental letters; and presently, at a masked ball, the dashing young Guardsman got his chance of making a whispered declaration.

He had much to say, he whispered, that he dared not put on paper. Might he not come to Catherine's room, for a moment, in order to say it?

"I told him it was quite impossible—that no one could enter my rooms, any more than I could leave them, unobserved. He offered to disguise himself, if necessary, as a domestic servant; but I refused, point blank, to let him do anything of the kind, and we got no further than this exchange of complimentary mottoes."

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We have only her word for that, of course ; but we need not be cynically sceptical. Though some letters have been published which lend themselves to a different interpretation, the story reminds us of nothing so much as a school-girl's first experiment with the grand passion over the garden wall, though Catherine was, in fact, two-and-twenty at the time. Things were not to happen quite so innocently when Sergius Soltikof came upon the scene.

Catherine owed her acquaintance to Sergius Soltikof to the complaisance of her chaperon. She constantly, at that time, sat in Mme Choglokof's apartments instead of her own ; and Mme Choglokof "received." Among other guests she received Sergius and his friend Léon Narishkin—the latter famous for his wit, and the former for his handsome presence. Knowing her own husband's propensities and inclinations, she may be supposed to have had her own reasons for wishing to introduce Catherine to the society of other men ; and Sergius, whom Catherine writes of as "beau comme le jour," showed himself a consummate tactician in dealing with his rivals.

He persuaded M. Choglokof that he was a poet ; and whenever he wanted to get rid of him, he sent him into the corner by the stove, to write a song. He also persuaded Léon Narishkin that he was a musician, and induced him to compose airs for Choglokof's songs, and try them over with him. "By those means,"

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Catherine explains, “we were enabled to converse without embarrassment;” and the conversation soon took the course which might have been expected. Sergius, that is to say, unmasked his batteries; and Catherine threw up defences—of a sort—

“‘How about your wife?’ I said to him. ‘You married her only two years ago. It was a love match. We all know that you are still in love with her, and that she loves you to distraction. What will she have to say about this?’ He replied by assuring me that all was not gold that glittered, and that he was now paying a heavy price for a momentary blindness.”

And Catherine—so she says—pitied him, but nevertheless withheld him—“all through the Spring, and for part of the Summer”—in spite of the fact that she met him nearly every day. She tried—so she relates—to check his ardour by the remark: “For anything that you can tell, my heart may already be Another’s.” She was surprised—so she would have us believe—to discover that the challenge increased his ardour instead of diminishing it; and then there came a crisis, of which the *Memoirs* give a graphic description.

The scene was an island on the Neva belonging to Choglokof, where a hunting party was assembled. Sergius contrived that he and

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Catherine should be alone together while the others were pursuing the hares, and seized the opportunity to plead his suit again—

“ I did not reply, and he took advantage of my silence to go on speaking of his passionate attachment, and begged me to let him hope that he might not be quite indifferent to me. I told him I could not possibly prevent him from indulging any dreams he liked. Then he compared himself with the other men attached to the Court, and made me admit that I preferred him to them, and drew his inferences. I laughed ; but I am bound to admit that I liked him. After our conversation had lasted about an hour and a half I told him he must go, as so long an interview would be likely to arouse suspicions. He refused to go unless I told him that I found his society agreeable. ‘ Yes, yes,’ I said, ‘ but make haste and go.’ ‘ You’ve said it,’ he replied, as he galloped off. ‘ No, no,’ I called after him. ‘ Yes, yes,’ he repeated ; and so we parted.”

They met again at supper, however, being detained on the island by a change in the weather. It was Sergius’s opportunity to say that the heavens favoured his suit, seeing that the storm had vouchsafed him a few more hours of Catherine’s company ; and Catherine declares that she, on her part, was very displeased with herself. “ I had thought,” she says, “ that I

SOLTIKOF

should be able to calm and control both his hot head and mine; but now I realised that this would be difficult, if not impossible."

The atmosphere there is very different from that of the flirtation with Andrew Czernichef through the half-opened door, and more charged with passion even than the atmosphere in which sentimental "devises" had been exchanged with Andrew Czernichef's brother. Catherine appears in the story triumphant at last over the Westerner's difficulty in distinguishing one Russian from another. Years and experience were telling—she was a grown woman, and serious. Her heart fluttered when she perceived an apparent breach in the continuity of Sergius Soltikof's attentions; whereas the disappearance of her previous admirers seems to have troubled her but little. And the affair developed in a manner which surprised her, and she found it smiled upon from an unexpected quarter.

"Listen," said her chaperon one day. "I have something very serious to say to you;" and this "something" was to the effect that there were exceptions to all rules—even to the rule that Grand Duchesses should be circumspect in their conduct and faithful to Grand Dukes. The *Memoirs* continue—

" 'I love my country,' she said, 'and I am in earnest in what I say, as you will soon dis-

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cover. You are in love. It must be either Sergius Soltikof or Léon Narishkin. If I am not mistaken, it is the latter.' 'No, no, it isn't,' I exclaimed. 'No matter,' she rejoined; 'if it isn't one of them, it is the other.' To that I made no answer, and she continued: 'Very well. You will see that I, at any rate, shall throw no difficulties in your way.' I pretended not to understand, and she scolded me several times, both in town and in the country, whither we repaired after Easter."

In reality, however, Catherine understood quite well; and, indeed, the hint was much too broad for its significance to be missed. An heir was wanted. The Grand Duke would be the putative father of any heir born to Catherine. It was better that he should be the actual father too; but, if that could not be, then the point could be waived, and those concerned could agree to make believe. That was what Mme Choglokof meant; and it is not to be supposed that the idea originated with her, or that she threw out the suggestion on her own sole responsibility. It was a suggestion, at any rate, to which Catherine yielded; and on 20th September 1754 she gave birth to a boy.

It cannot actually be proved, of course, either that Soltikof was, or that Peter was not, the father of this child; and there is even a further element of mystery. The child was taken away from its mother by the Empress's

THE HEIR

orders, and was not returned to her until after an interval of about six weeks. It is not certain that the child brought back was identical with the child which had been taken away. The belief was current—one encounters it even in the dispatches of ambassadors—that the Empress herself became a mother at this date, and that her infant was secretly substituted for Catherine's. The manner of the Empress's life was certainly such as to lend colour to the hypothesis, though her age—she was then forty-five—makes it improbable. It is necessary to note the rumour before proceeding to draw inferences from the treatment subsequently meted out to Catherine and her lover.

It is treatment which certainly suggests that the authorities had connived at an irregularity, but now wished to prevent its continuance after it had served its purpose, and even, so far as might be possible, to cover up all traces of it. Sergius Soltikof was entrusted with honourable but unimportant missions to foreign countries—first in Sweden and afterwards at Hamburg—and so kept out of the way; and though Catherine was presented with roubles and jewellery as tokens of the Empress's favour, the personality of her Court was once more changed—for fear, presumably, lest her attendants, having acquired a taste for intrigue, might indulge it by conniving at irregularities which the authorities did not desire.

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Once more, therefore, she was relegated to a life of isolation—separated not only from Sergius Soltikof, who consoled himself elsewhere, but also from Mme Choglokof, who, from being her argus, had become her confidante, and from Princess Gargarin, who had made herself so useful in the carrying of love-letters. The society of Peter was, of course, no consolation for the loss ; for she tells us, in this part of her narrative, that he smelt horribly of wine and tobacco ; that the noise in his apartment, which adjoined hers, was like the racket in a guard-room ; that he got disgustingly drunk on the day of her confinement ; and that he, shortly afterwards, picked a quarrel with her and went so far as to threaten her with his sword. But she had grown up. She was now twenty-five, and she had tasted liberty. Whatever irksome restrictions might be placed around her, it was no longer possible to treat her quite as a child. Unless she were actually imprisoned—which no party proposed—she was bound to find opportunities of emancipation.

How she found them—and how she availed herself of them—is what we have now to see ; but we must first do her the justice of noting that her original divagation from the straight path was not spontaneous but suggested—that temptation was deliberately thrown in her way, and that she did not yield to it until those under whose tutelage she was placed pressed her to do so.

CHAPTER V

Removal of Restrictions—Liaison with Poniatowski—The Intrigues of Bestuchef

THE Court at which Catherine was seeking, and obtaining, emancipation was an emancipated Court, with an emancipated Empress at the head of it. One may help oneself to form some notion of its tone by recalling that one of Elizabeth's favourite diversions was to arrange dances at which the men were required to wear skirts and the women to wear breeches ;¹ her idea being that she herself looked well in breeches, whereas other women looked ridiculous in them. It may be argued that such gaieties are, in themselves, innocent and harmless ; but the fact remains that they do not often, in practice, occur in conjunction with Puritanical standards of morality.

Nor did they in this instance. It has already been said that Elizabeth was frivolous ; and it may be added that her levity was notorious even in the age of Louis xv. She had “favourites” ; and, as she did not make a

¹ At another Court entertainment all the women were required to appear in wigs with shaven heads.

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point of confining her favours to a single favourite, it hardly matters, so far as religion and morality are concerned, whether she was or was not secretly married to one of them. It has been written that the privileged men who shared her favours regarded themselves “not as rivals but as colleagues”; and it is also recorded that she and her favourites used to get drunk together. One of Peter’s offensive eccentricities, indeed, consisted in boring peep-holes through the wall of her apartment in order that he and his boon companions might pry upon her at her hours of ease and inebriety; and public opinion agreed in regarding it as more important that the Grand Duke should behave like a gentleman than that the Empress should keep sober.

And she did not keep sober, but became a more and more graceless creature as middle age approached. She was good-natured and soft-hearted; but circumstances had been too much for her, and now her ruling passion was terror. Remembering the palace revolution which had raised her to power, she lived in dread of being dethroned in her turn and receiving the treatment which had been meted out to others in her name. Visions of the dagger, the bowl, the rope, and the dungeon haunted her in the midst of her most ostentatious pleasures. Drink, prayer, and cards were the various anodynes with which she sought to calm her fears. She spent hours on her knees, and then other hours

GREATER FREEDOM

at the gaming-table, not getting to bed until five o'clock in the morning. She used several bedrooms, so that no assassin might know where she meant to sleep on any given night,¹ and often contented herself with lying down for a few hours on a couch. She distrusted her favourites and yet clung to them.

High moral principles, it is clear, could not flourish in that atmosphere. The Empress was always ready to sacrifice her highest principles to any reasons of state; and her courtiers and ministers followed her example, if they did not anticipate it. We have seen them doing so in the case of the Soltikof affair, and we shall see them doing so again. Bestuchef, the Chancellor, certainly did not allow moral scruples to shackle him when higher interests were at stake. There is excellent reason to believe that Soltikof received from him a hint very similar to that which Catherine received from Mme Chogloko; and when Soltikof had acted on the hint, and been discreetly removed from a Court at which his presence was no longer desired, Bestuchef adopted an attitude of politic indulgence towards Catherine. Like other people, he looked forward, and fore-saw a time when it might be better to have her for a friend than for an enemy. He also understood that, while it might now be difficult to obstruct her in the path of pleasure, it might

¹ This habit is noted by the ambassadors quite in the early years of her reign.

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be possible, and profitable, to guide her in it. Young women, in short, would be young women, and there was no particular reason why they should not be if their husbands were unfaithful, as Peter notoriously was ; but, in the case of such a young woman as Catherine, it was important that her heart should be occupied by the right young man.

So, if we may judge by his conduct, Bestuchef argued. The time was coming when he would want Catherine for a partner in political intrigue ; and the personality of her lover would then be a factor of consequence. If his own nominee were accepted for the post, a great point would have been gained. Just as it had suited him to accord a temporary support to Sergius Soltikof, so now it suited him to put forward Stanislas Poniatowski—and not only to put him forward, but even, when Poniatowski hesitated, to slap him on the back and push him forward.

Poniatowski was the son of a Lithuanian domestic servant who had attained to preferment by treachery and been given the hand of Princess Czartoryski as a portion of his reward. He was at this time—we are in 1755—a youth of two-and-twenty who had “knocked about” in Paris and in London and shown some address in the art of making friends. In the former city he had been rescued from imprisonment for debt by Mme Geoffrin ; in the

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latter he had won the confidence of Horace Walpole's friend, Charles Hanbury Williams, spoken of by Dr. Johnson as "our lively and elegant, though too licentious, lyric bard"; and Williams, being now appointed to succeed Guy Dickens as British Ambassador at the Russian Court, proposed to take the young Pole with him in some nondescript unofficial capacity.

That is how he and Catherine came to meet; and they met in circumstances which made it easy for their relations to become confidential. Bestuchef wished them to do so, and Williams wished it also. We need not try to follow all the currents and cross-currents of the diplomacy of the time; but the essential fact is that Williams discovered Catherine as a potential force in polities. He had found the Empress amiable but impracticable—always ready to dance with him, but never ready to negotiate. He had found Peter hopeless—drunk, stupid, prejudiced, and inaccessible to new ideas. On the other hand, a conversation with Catherine at a supper-party satisfied him that she was no ordinary puppet princess, but a woman of intelligence, with a future—and also with weak points, by playing on which an intelligent envoy might make her useful.

As a matter of fact, Williams did not succeed in making her quite as useful as he had hoped. Those cross-currents of which we have spoken interfered with the course which he proposed to steer. Though Catherine's hour was coming, it

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had not yet come. She had Bestuchef on her side ; but there was a tug-of-war proceeding behind the scenes between Bestuchef and the Schouvalofs,¹ and the victory was to rest with the latter. Hence the check which Williams's diplomacy in the end encountered. Still, he began his game well, though he did not finish it successfully. He discovered that Catherine's assailable points were her need for money and her passion for romance. He lent her money (receipts for about fifty thousand roubles of British Secret Service money have been preserved);² and though he shrank from the adventurous course of making love to her in person, he contrived, with Bestuchef's connivance, that Poniatowski should do so on his behalf.

There was another candidate—a certain Count Lehadrof. He and Poniatowski were put forward on the same evening in a competition which one may almost describe as a beauty show, with the members of the Court for spectators and Catherine herself for judge. “I prefer the Pole,” she replied to those who questioned her ; and it only remained to tell Poniatowski what she had said, and persuade him to take advantage of her preference.

That task was entrusted to Narishkin,—the same Narishkin to whom we have just seen

¹ One of the Schouvalofs was the favourite of the Empress Elizabeth.

² A proposal to repay the money (which the British Government did not wish to accept) was the subject of some diplomatic correspondence after her accession to the throne.

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Soltikof preferred,—an amiable buffoon who hung about the Court and made himself generally useful. It was not an easy task, for Poniatowski was timorous. He feared the fate of other lovers of Russian princesses who, it was whispered, had been favoured for a season and had then ceased to please, and been relegated—*their mission accomplished*—to the deepest dungeon of a frowning fortress or the remotest village of the frozen north. Such things had certainly sometimes happened as the tragic sequels of amours in Russian palaces; and no one can say that Poniatowski's apprehension was unnatural. Narishkin, however, persevered with him, and Catherine herself paid him a significant compliment; and so, to quote his *Memoirs*—

“At last I screwed up my courage and ventured to write her a note. Narishkin brought me her answer the next day, and then I forgot all about Siberia. A few days later he took me to see her.”

Then follows his vivid description of her charms—

“She was twenty-five, and had lately recovered from her first confinement and reached the moment at which beautiful women are at the height of their beauty. She had black hair, a dazzlingly fair skin, a brilliant complexion,

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large, eloquent blue eyes, long black eyelashes, a Grecian nose, a mouth that seemed made for kissing, a trim waist, not too small, an active and yet dignified carriage, a soft and pleasant voice, and a laugh as merry as her disposition. Her manner was very caressing. She was quick at discovering every one's weak point; and she was then paving her way, by winning the affection of her people, to the throne which she afterwards occupied so gloriously. Such was the mistress who became the arbitress of my destiny. My whole life was devoted to her—far more so than is usually the case with lovers."

There are other touches: that the painful circumstances of Catherine's married life had driven her to books for consolation; that she was as much at her ease in abstruse mathematical calculations as in the give-and-take of playful repartee. It is the portrait of a lover who was indeed in love, and who laid an innocent and unsophisticated heart at her feet; and it is also the first lifelike and convincing portrait which we possess. Catherine herself, in her own narrative, hardly reveals herself an individual; but her lover does reveal her. Now that he has spoken, we have no longer to make what we can of anecdotest clustering round an illustrious name, but can perceive the real charms of a real woman, and divine her energy and ambition. Politically, Poniatowski was little more than a child in her hands; but he was a child who

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understood. He felt Catherine's potential as well as her actual significance ; and there are many little touches in his story which, though they throw no light on the wire-pulling and secret diplomacy of the time, enable us to picture his mistress's position, and the tone which those about her took towards her amours.

She had outgrown tutelage, but she was suspected and spied upon by one party while the other intrigued with her. She could at last live pretty much as she liked, provided that she indulged her fancies with discretion, paid virtue the homage of a decent hypocrisy, and did not give her amours too obvious a political complexion. There was no real mystery about her relations with Poniatowski, but a certain pretence of mystery had to be kept up. He was smuggled to her apartments, and sometimes concealed in them when she received other visitors. She sallied from the Palace in disguise to keep appointments with him in the houses of persons in her confidence. If everybody did not know all about it, anybody might easily have done so ; but nobody minded—not even her mother-in-law—not even her husband.

Peter's attitude in the matter, indeed, is the subject of a queerly characteristic story, which is related by too many independent witnesses to be disbelieved. One of his officers, it seems, caught the lover prowling about the Palace in disguise, refused to accept his explanation that he was a tailor going about his sartorial business,

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took him by the scruff of the neck, and dragged him into the Grand Duke's presence. The ensuing conversation is thus reported by the French Ambassador, M. de l'Hôpital:—

“I know all about your relations with the Grand Duchess,” said the Grand Duke, “and I suspect that you also have designs against myself. I see you are carrying pistols.” “What an extraordinary suspicion!” “What! Your only object is to see the Grand Duchess? Very well, friend Poniatowski! Go and have supper with her! I too have a mistress, as you know.”

Poniatowski himself, relating the same incident, says that the Grand Duke actually fetched the Grand Duchess from her bed, and brought her to him, without giving her time even to put on her stockings; and he goes on—

“I often used to go to see them at Oranienbaum. I used to arrive in the evening, and find my way to the Grand Duchess's apartment by a back staircase. There I used to meet the Grand Duke and his mistress. We used all to have supper together, and, after supper, the Grand Duke used to retire with his mistress, saying, ‘There you are, my children. You don't want to see any more of me;’ and I was free to stay as late as I liked.”

Such was life; and we cannot get the perspective right, and do justice to Catherine,

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unless we realise that life was such—that she was no freak of frivolity, but was only living as every one expected her to live. It occurred to no one that a Grand Duchess, neglected by her husband and admired by other men, would chastely repel all ardent advances. The British Ambassador was of one mind in that matter with the Russian Chancellor. He encouraged Catherine by assuring her that, if she were firm, and let it be clearly understood that she would regard an affront to the man whom she favoured as an affront to herself, she would find that she was allowed to live her own life without interference. He also arranged—or allowed it to be arranged—that she and her lover should meet for their first interviews at the house of the British Consul; and Bestuchef simultaneously contrived to establish Poniatowski's position on a securer basis by inviting his nomination as the diplomatic representative of Poland.

The love affair, in short, was a move in a great political game. The object of English policy was to save Frederick the Great from destruction by the allied forces of France, Austria, Saxony, and Russia; and British gold was being poured out freely to that end. Catherine wanted money; Bestuchef wanted money; all sorts of people wanted money. William's dispatches are full of reports of their requirements. He asks that Bestuchef, whose stipend is only 7000 roubles, shall be promised a British pension of £2500 a year. He announces that

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Funk, the Saxon Ambassador, not having received any stipend recently from his own Government, is willing to sell his influence for a pension of 500 ducats, and that Bestuchef's private secretary can be bought for a pension of 250 ducats—and so forth.

Bestuchef, at the same time, was playing a game of his own as well as the game of the British Ambassador. He recognised Catherine as the rising sun, and wished to stand well with her in view of contingencies. He knew that Peter was in bad odour with the Empress, whose pleasures he had spied upon, as we have seen, through peep-holes, and whose devotions he also disturbed by pacing the chapel with clanking military accoutrements and talking at the top of his voice when she engaged in prayer. He further knew—what was obvious to all the world—that Peter preferred his mistress, Elizabeth Vorontsof, the ugly sister of the Vice-Chancellor of the Empire, to his wife; and that the bad feeling in that quarter was fraught with exciting possibilities.

It was possible that Peter would wish to repudiate Catherine and her child—which might not even be hers. It was also possible that the Empress, whose health was visibly declining, would name the child as her heir instead of Peter, and that Catherine would be the Regent during the child's minority. The time was visibly approaching when men in prominent positions would have to take sides; and he

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divined that Catherine's side would be the best to take—especially as she did not like the Schouvalofs, and the Schouvalofs did not like him, but were intriguing for his overthrow. So he who had once forbidden her to correspond with her own mother except through the medium of the Foreign Office now not only smiled upon her love affairs, but engaged in mysterious and underhand negotiations with her. She writes of herself, at this period, as deciding to take an “independent course”; and the French Ambassador reports her as figuring at the head of a cabal.

There were, in fact, two cabals manœuvring at the Court at the time: the Anglo-Prussian cabal, represented in St. Petersburg by Catherine and Bestuchef; and the Franco-Austrian cabal, associated more or less with the Schouvalof interest. Time was on the side of the former; but the latter were the stronger at the moment. The Empress did not die as soon as Bestuchef and Hanbury Williams expected, and consequently the Schouvalofs won the first tricks in the game. Their first triumph consisted in ordering Catherine's lover to return to Poland;¹ their second, in causing Bestuchef to be arrested, on 26th February 1758. And, Russia being what Russia was, the arrest of Bestuchef implied grave danger for Catherine.

A plot was suspected. It was also suspected

¹ He ultimately went, but remained some time in hiding in St. Petersburg, seeing Catherine secretly.

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that Catherine was implicated in the plot. Bestuchef's house was being searched for compromising correspondence. If anything were found, Catherine would assuredly be asked for explanations, and her explanations might not be accepted.

CHAPTER VI

Catherine suspected of Complicity with Bestuchef—A Scene with the Empress—Return of Poniatowski to Poland—Catherine's consolatory adventures

HAPPILY for Catherine, no really compromising documents were brought to light. She had burnt Bestuchef's letters, and Bestuchef had burnt hers—a reassuring note to that effect, hastily scrawled at the last minute, was smuggled to her. There existed only her letters to General Aprakhsin, who was at the seat of war, and some letters from Bestuchef to Poniatowski, in which her name appeared—one does not know in what precise connection. On the whole, therefore, the case against her was weaker on paper than in the minds of her accusers. It was the kind of case, in short, which could only be pressed against a weak antagonist—the kind of case to which the best answer was the bold attitude of a courageous personality.

Catherine realised that, and rose to the occasion. We have seen how her personality appeared to the man who loved her; we may now note how it impressed an impartial stranger.

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The Chevalier d'Eon was in St. Petersburg at about this time, and this is the character sketch which he wrote of her—

“ The Grand Duchess is romantic, ardent, passionate. Her eyes shine, and her expression fascinates one, like the glassy gleam in the eyes of a wild beast. She has a high forehead, and, if I am not mistaken, there is the mark on that forehead of a long and appalling future. She is friendly and affable in her manner, but I instinctively shrink from her when she approaches. She frightens me.”

That is an illuminating touch ; for a great deal depends, at such a crisis, one may be sure, upon the look in the eyes of the accused ; and the look which impresses and prevails is not the look of martyred innocence, but that of indignant challenge. We must picture Catherine's eyes at this juncture as the eyes of an angry woman who would carry the war into the enemy's camp, divide in order to conquer, as only a beautiful woman can, and even, if need were, throw up a window and thrust her head out, demanding who was on her side. Such a woman may be crushed by a strong case, but not by a weak one ; and this case was weak—and Catherine knew it, and took her measures accordingly.

She was a guest, on the night of her peril, at a ball given in honour of Narishkin's wed-

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ding ; and she questioned the Master of the Ceremonies as to Bestuchef's arrest, and got a reassuring answer : " We had our orders and obeyed them ; but as to the crime, we are still in the dark. The investigations have not yet produced much result." She next made her arrangements for an interview with Poniatowski at the Court theatre ; and when difficulties were made, asserted her rights and put her objectors in the wrong with unexpected energy. Her maids-of-honour would not be allowed to accompany her ? Then she would go without them. Her carriage would not be available ? Then she would go on foot. And not only that. She would appeal, over the heads of the Schouvalof faction, to the Empress herself. She did not believe that the Empress knew how she was being treated ; but she would tell her. There was her letter, and Alexander Schouvalof himself must deliver it.

The Schouvalofs, in brief, had sown the wind and now discovered that there was a whirlwind to be reaped. Catherine's fury was like a tornado sweeping all obstacles before it. Alexander Schouvalof dared not suppress the letter ; and, in case he might try to persuade the Empress to ignore its appeal, another spring was pressed. Catherine sent for her confessor, who was also confessor to the Empress, kept him at her bedside for an hour and a half, and charged him to carry a message in which her political grievances and her personal grievances against her

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husband were inextricably mixed up. She begged to be allowed to leave the country in order to escape from persecution ; but, first and foremost, she craved an audience.

Her prayer was granted, and she was fetched from her bed to the audience at one o'clock in the morning. The Empress, whose late hours we have noted, received her in her dimly lighted bedroom. Her husband and Alexander Schouvalof were present ; and there was a screen at the end of the room behind which Ivan Schouvalof was hidden. On a tray on one of the toilet tables lay a little heap of neatly docketed letters. These were the “pieces of conviction”—the incriminating correspondence (if, indeed, it was incriminating) discovered by means of perquisitions and domiciliary visits. Catherine had been summoned to be placed on her defence, if not actually on her trial. But she did not wait to be interrogated. She knelt to the Empress, and begged a favour. She was the victim, she said, of shameful persecution—might she not be sent home to her parents ? And then—

“ How can I send you home ? Remember that you have children.”

“ My children are in your hands. They could not be in better hands. I trust that you will not forsake them.”

“ But how am I to explain your dismissal to the public ? ”



The Empress Elizabeth of Russia



BESTUCHEF'S PLOT

“ Your Imperial Majesty can tell the public the reasons for which I have fallen into disgrace with you and have incurred the hatred of the Grand Duke.”

“ And what will you live upon ? ”

“ I shall live as I lived before you did me the honour of taking me from my home.”

“ But your mother is in exile. She has been obliged to leave her home and settle in Paris.”

“ I know it. She was thought to be too deeply attached to Russian interests, and has consequently been persecuted by the King of Prussia.”

It was a brave and brilliant beginning. It avoided the real issue, and appealed to patriotism and the public. It drew the admission that there was, indeed, a public which might have a word to say. It appealed to pity without any sacrifice of pride. It showed that Catherine was not afraid, and at the same time it moved the Empress. Tears were now mingled with Elizabeth's reproaches. She recalled the days when Catherine had been ill, and she had wept for her. She began to find it difficult to push home her complaints. There was a look in Catherine's eyes and a tone in Catherine's voice which discouraged and disconcerted her. And then Peter broke into the conversation, and gave Catherine her opportunity to divide and conquer—

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“She has a nasty temper,” said Peter, “and she is shockingly pig-headed.”

“If it is of me that you are speaking,” replied Catherine, “I am very pleased to have the opportunity of telling you in the presence of Her Imperial Majesty that it is quite true that my temper is sharp towards those who advise you to treat me with injustice, and that I became pig-headed because I found that my endeavours to please you only caused you to show your dislike for me.”

“Your Imperial Majesty,” pursued Peter, “can judge of her temper from her language. Let me tell you a story to show how nasty she can be.”

But Peter was not encouraged to tell his story. The Empress, for reasons which have been given, did not like him. Catherine, in fact, had seen letters in which the Empress had stated her candid opinion of Peter. In one of them she had called him “that damned nephew of mine.” In another she had written, “My nephew is an idiot. The Devil take him !” In so far as the quarrel was a domestic one, her sympathies were far more with his wife than with him. She paced the room, listening now to one, now to the other ; and she realised (as Catherine saw) that Peter only wanted his wife put out of the way in order that he might instal Elizabeth Vorontsof in her place. Of these two women (if she must choose

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between them) it was distinctly Catherine whom she preferred. So she snubbed Peter, and turned to Catherine, who did not flinch, but answered her questions fearlessly, and almost aggressively.

It was true, she admitted, that she had corresponded with General Aprakhsin; but what of that? The letters did not convict, but acquitted her. There they were, on the tray on the toilet table. The Empress could see for herself that they contained nothing treasonable—nothing of the slightest consequence. In one letter she had told the General what people in St. Petersburg were saying about his conduct of the campaign in Prussia; in another, she had congratulated him on the birth of his son. No more than that. “But there are other letters,” objected the Empress. “Bestuchef says so.” “Then Bestuchef is a liar.” “I will have him questioned on the rack.” “Your Majesty is Empress. I cannot prevent your Majesty from doing so.”

And so forth. It was not Catherine but the Empress who was giving ground in the encounter. Catherine had triumphantly taken the line that, if there were to be any more of this nonsense, she would leave the country. Elizabeth had formed, or confirmed, the opinion that Catherine was a woman of intelligence, whereas Peter was a fool. She was a little afraid of Catherine—a little afraid also of her own advisers. She indicated to Catherine that

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she had much to say to her which could only be said when they were alone. Catherine replied that she too had “a pressing desire to open her heart.” And so, at three o’clock in the morning, the interview ended ; but presently there came a knock at Catherine’s door.

The visitor was Alexander Schouvalof—so recently her accuser—who was now charged to say, with the compliments of the Empress, that Catherine must on no account distress herself ; that the Empress would accord her another audience, and this time would receive her alone. The triumph was as complete as that, and partially covered even Bestuchef’s discomfiture. The case against him was allowed to drag on for nearly a year ; and, at the end of that time, though he was denounced in a public manifesto for “allowing himself, in the blindness of his ambition, to attempt to shake the confidence of the Empress in her well-beloved nephew and heir and her dear niece the Grand Duchess,” he received no punishment beyond deposition from his office and the command to retire to his country house and stay there. And Catherine, meanwhile, remained on the friendliest terms with the Empress, as the British Ambassador—Keith, who had now succeeded Hanbury Williams—duly reported to his Government.

That was in 1759, in which year Catherine’s *Memoirs* come to an abrupt end with an unfinished sentence. She pictures herself, on the

RETIREMENT

final pages, withdrawing from political activity, feigning indisposition, and turning over the first volumes of Diderot's *Encyclopédie*. Apparently she had had her lesson, and inferred that it would be wiser to wait for the future instead of anticipating it—to make friends quietly instead of making herself conspicuous by intrigue. According to one of her biographers, she "shut herself up in impenetrable obscurity"; while others attribute a sentimental motive to her retirement. Poniatowski, to whom she had borne a child,—a daughter, who died in infancy,—and who had lingered on in St. Petersburg, under the pretence of ill-health, for some months after his deprivation of diplomatic status, was at last obliged to leave her; and Rulhière, of the French Embassy, represents her as refusing the society of all women "except those who, like herself, had loved Poles."

Very possibly she gave the impression of doing so—for a little while. She was one of those rare women who can be deeply sentimental without averting their thoughts altogether from the main chance. We are not obliged to believe the report that she dropped from her bedroom window on to the shoulders of Bestuchef's butler, to be carried pickaback to her lover's arms; but her heart was touched, even if she did not make that particular sacrifice of dignity. Poniatowski was, at any rate, a lover who was really in love, and not a mere

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gallant out for gay adventure. He cuts a very human and engaging figure in his *Memoirs*. He had that *âme sensible* which meant so much to the women of the eighteenth century, and was so rare in Russia. He was to write to Catherine presently, assuring her that her love was more to him than a kingdom, and imploring her to summon him to her side instead of setting him on a throne. One cannot suppose her to have been unmoved by such unique devotion; one cannot doubt that she gave sentiment its hour.

But only its hour; for she had other things to think about—as even Rulhière admits. It was during this period, he insists, that she “laid the foundations of her greatness.” He depicts her “rising at dawn and devoting whole days to the perusal of good French books,” while, at the same time, learning “all that she ever knew of the arts of intrigue.” He adds that “the veil of her grand passion covered several consolatory adventures.”

It certainly covered certain adventures with the brothers Orloff, though it might be hard to say how far those adventures were pursued for the sake of consolation and how far from ulterior and more ambitious motives. The atmosphere, at any rate, from 1759 onwards was quite as thick with intrigue as with amours. Elizabeth, like Charles II., was an unconscionably long time in dying, though she did not, like Charles, apologise for the delay; but it

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was clear that she would die soon, and that her death would give the signal for a re-shuffling of the cards, and a fresh scramble for place and influence, in the course of which new men might come to the front. We may pause to note the names of those who expected parts in the coming drama, and observe them manœuvring for position by the Empress's death-bed.

CHAPTER VII

Intrigues by the Empress's Death-Bed — Panin — Princess Dashkof — The Brothers Orlof — Death of the Empress Elizabeth, and Accession of Peter III

NOBODY knows—nobody will ever know—exactly what happened during those days through which the conspirators were waiting for the Empress to die. Nothing—or hardly anything—was put on paper; so that nothing—or hardly anything—can be proved. That was the principal lesson which Catherine learnt from the circumstances of Bestuchef's fall. It now sufficed for her to talk,—to drop hints, and pick them up,—to diffuse the impression that she would be found equal to any fortune, and that, if she were exalted to a high estate, her friends would prosper with her.

Nor is it known for certain how and why the Empress died. It was said that she died of colic. It was also said that she died of a surfeit of cherry brandy—or perhaps of brandied cherries. Whatever the immediate cause of her death, it is tolerably certain that her days were shortened by her intemperance—and also by her fears; for she was a weak and frivolous

DEATH OF THE EMPRESS ELIZABETH

woman, thrust into a strenuous and perilous part which she was quite unfitted to sustain.

Lestocq—the French surgeon and adventurer who contrived the palace revolution of 1741—is said to have frightened her into taking the action which she took. The story goes that he picked up a pencil and drew two pictures which he showed to her. One of them represented Elizabeth as a nun, with a shaven head, immured in a convent, and himself as a criminal about to be broken on the wheel; the other depicted Elizabeth with a crown upon her head, and himself as a courtier seated on the steps of the throne. “You have to choose,” he said. “You have to make your choice to-night.” And she made her choice in haste and terror, scrambling on to the throne much as a shipwrecked mariner scrambles on to a rock or a piece of floating drift-wood. Whether her position was secure or not, she never felt it to be secure.

Her temper, in reality, was mild and amiable. Ambassadors always found her charming. She was not without culture and taste for the fine arts. She encouraged the arts, if she did not know much about them. She meant well and kindly, and, left to her natural disposition, would hardly have hurt a fly. If ever she was cruel, it was because she was frightened into cruelty. Her favourites—or some of them, at all events—continued to love her even when she tired of them. Her

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most memorable saying was that she had never been happy except when she was in love. But fear was, for many years, her dominant emotion. She dreaded the night because she knew that the night was the time for revolutions. She dared not, as we have seen, let it be known in what room she would sleep ; she dared not sleep except with a trusted servant, armed to the teeth, watching by her side—the whole Empire was searched for a retainer who could be relied upon not to doze. Long prayers and deep potations were her comforts. The prayers became longer and the potations deeper as the years rolled by.

Women who live thus do not live to be old. Elizabeth only lived to be fifty-two ; and for the last two years of her life she saw conspirators discounting her death, and considering what advantage they would take of it. She could not even be sure, indeed, that they would wait for her death before snatching at the advantage. There was always a possibility that a party might be formed in favour of Ivan, whom she had deposed in infancy, and who had been brought up in prisons and monasteries. It is said that Ivan was deliberately drugged into imbecility, so that he might be harmless. It seems tolerably certain that he was perpetually transferred from prison to prison and from monastery to monastery, so that conspirators who wanted to proclaim him Emperor might not know where to find him.

PANIN

And the proclamation of Ivan was not the only possibility canvassed while Elizabeth's powers were failing. There was a party for Peter, and also a party against him. There was a party which was in favour of passing over Peter in favour of Catherine's boy, Paul, and making Catherine regent during Paul's minority. There was a party ready to support Peter in repudiating Catherine, declaring Paul illegitimate, and making Elizabeth Vorontsof Empress. They were all whispering at once round the death-bed: some of them urging the dying woman to settle the succession herself in the sense in which they wished it settled; others speculating whether it would not be better to have a forged will in readiness to produce at the hour when the inheritance fell in. And Catherine, meanwhile, was saying nothing, but working quietly—putting nothing on paper, but conciliating the friends who were presently to stand powerfully and usefully on her side. Even the Schouvalofs were willing to be conciliated now, though it was not to them that she proposed to confide her secrets and entrust her fate. She wanted a statesman, a soldier, and a female confidante; and she found Panin, the Orlofs, and Princess Dashkof.

Panin, when a handsome youth of nine-and-twenty, had been proposed by Bestuchef for the post of favourite to Elizabeth. It is uncertain whether he shrank from the onerous

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responsibility of such functions or showed himself unworthy of them. There is a story, for which Poniatowski is the authority, that the Empress waited and waited, expecting him to knock at her door, and at last peeped out and found that he had fallen asleep in the passage ; but that story may be malicious gossip. Be that as it may, he entered the Diplomatic Service, served with distinction at Copenhagen and Stockholm, and, on his recall in 1760, was appointed tutor to the Grand Duke Paul. He was now thirty-nine, and fat—too fat, and also too indolent, to be any longer eligible for the post of favourite.

Though indolent, however, he was ambitious, and though corpulent, he was capable. When, in the course of time, he became Foreign Minister, the various Ambassadors sent home anecdotal photographs of his way of life. For instance—

“ He was devoted to the pleasures of the table, to women, and to gambling. By eating too much and sleeping too much, he had become a veritable ball of fat. He rose at noon, and listened to funny stories until one ; then he took a cup of chocolate, and spent three hours in dressing. At half-past three he sat down to dinner, and continued dining until five. At six he went to bed and slept until eight, at which hour his valets pulled him out of bed and set him on his legs. His second toilet finished, he sat down at the card-table and

PRINCESS DASHKOF

played until eleven. Then came supper, and then more games of cards. About three, he retired to work, finally getting to bed about five."

So writes Laveaux. He is a hostile witness ; but the evidence of the friendly witnesses is substantially the same. They merely add that Panin was as honest as he was obese ; and it is clear that he was also, in comparison with Catherine's other friends, experienced, discreet, and shrewd. There was Italian blood in his veins,—the Paganinis have claimed kinship with him,—and one may perhaps think of him as an adipose and incorruptible Machiavelli. A faction inspired by him would move slowly, and keep open a line of retreat. He would remember, and insist upon, the maxim : *Chi va piano va sano ; chi va sano va lontano.* He would pull wires adroitly, and be careful to pull none which would set alarm bells ringing. His name, too, and his position, carried weight. He was a most valuable asset to the party, though he would keep in the background and leave violent action to others.

Of Princess Dashkof one speaks with some hesitation, because it is almost impossible to do so without contradicting a lady. She was a Vorontsof—a sister of the Elizabeth Vorontsof whom Peter preferred to his wife ; and she was, at this time, about eighteen years of age. Her *Memoirs* contain a full account of the conspiracy

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which we are approaching ; and they give us to understand that she was the originator of it, and its inspiring genius. She tells us how, hearing that the Empress's end was at last imminent, she rushed to Catherine with the news, exclaiming breathlessly, “ In the name of Heaven, place your confidence in me ; I am worthy of it.” She adds that Catherine had “ formed no sort of plan,” and believed that there was nothing for her to do but to place her trust in God ; and she reports herself as saying, in reply to this admission, “ Then your friends must act for you. As for myself, I have zeal enough to inflame them all.”

It cannot be. Girls of eighteen have never been as important as all that, at any period, or in any country. The view of Rulhière, of the French Embassy, that Princess Dashkof was only “ the excited fly on the wheel,” taking all the credit for its revolutions, is more in accordance with the probabilities. Perhaps we may trust her for the spectacular details of the drama about to be described ; and we may certainly conclude that use was made of her —that she was trusted—that she went to and fro carrying messages. But that—except for one moment's useful activity—is all. She was confidante, but not conspirator - in - chief, though she magnified her rôle in later life, when she and Catherine had quarrelled and she wished to overwhelm Catherine with railing accusations of ingratitude. Catherine, at thirty-

GREGORY ORLOF

two, was not the woman to ask a girl of eighteen to pilot her to a throne—to organise a party for her, and then to lead that party. That was a man's work; and it was on men that she must lean. Long before Princess Dashkof burst into her bedroom with hysterical offers of help, she had had her quiet talks with Panin, and also with the Orlofs, and more particularly with Gregory and Alexis Orlof.

The name Orlof means eagle, and was bestowed upon the founder of the family on account of his signal intrepidity. As a private soldier, implicated in a military revolt, he was condemned to death in 1689; but the cool courage which he displayed on the scaffold saved him at the eleventh hour. The ground was covered with the bleeding heads of comrades already executed. The indifferent air with which he brushed those heads aside as he took his own way to the block arrested Peter the Great's attention. Such a man, he said, must not die; such a man, on the contrary, must be pardoned and promoted. So Ivan Orlof was rescued from the headsman's axe, and ennobled. He became the father of a Governor of Novgorod, and the grandfather of the five brothers who were to be Catherine's companions in the desperate adventure which she was preparing: Ivan, Theodore, Vladimir, Alexis, and Gregory—the two last named being Catherine's especial friends.

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They were handsome young officers ; and Catherine always had a tenderness for such, though her tenderness seldom blinded her eyes to their intellectual limitations. The French Ambassador, in one of his dispatches, described Gregory in particular as “ a perfect blockhead.” But Gregory, blockhead or not, was the handsomest man in the Russian army—and Alexis was the tallest and the strongest ; and they all had the reputation of officers whose men would follow them wherever they chose to lead ; and the Guard, as it had proved in more than one palace revolution, could, if it were unanimous, dispose of the destinies of Russia. The task of the Orlofs, therefore, in the rough work to come, was clearly marked out for them ; and they could be depended upon, because Gregory had succeeded Poniatowski as Catherine’s lover. Our first glimpse of him is in the *Historical Memoirs* of Sir Nathaniel Wraxall.

Wraxall knew Wroughton — the British Consul in whose house we have seen Catherine and Poniatowski meeting, with the connivance of the British Ambassador. Catherine distinguished Wroughton by “ personal attentions of the most flattering nature ” ; and Wraxall considered it “ not an improbable supposition that she might have carried to the utmost extent her preference of him ” ; but that is not so certain. He was satisfied, at any rate, to be “ her humble friend and servant ” ; and, in that capacity, he received a confidence from her—

GREGORY ORLOF

“ Crossing the court of the Winter Palace at Petersburg, some time during the year 1760, the Grand Duchess, who leaned on his arm, pointed out to him a young man in the uniform of the Russian Guards, then in the act of saluting her with his spontoon. *Vous voyez ce beau jeune homme. Le connaissez-vous?* Wroughton replying in the negative, *Il s'appelle Orlof*, said Catherine. *Croiriez-vous qu'il a eu la hardiesse de me faire l'amour? Il est bien hardi, madame*, answered he, smiling. The conversation proceeded no further; but it remained deeply imprinted upon Wroughton's recollection, who from that moment silently anticipated the future favour of Orlof.”

Wraxall's French is probably at fault here. Catherine must certainly have said *faire la cour*, and not *faire l'amour*, which means rather more than she would have been at all likely to say; but that is a detail. The passage shows us the love affair beginning at a time when Catherine was only seeking “consolatory adventures” to relieve her distress at the loss of Poniatowski, and had no glimmering idea of the purpose to which this particular adventure could be turned.

The times being troubled, however, that idea gradually, and almost inevitably, took shape. Catherine was, or at all events soon might be, pretty much in the case in which Elizabeth had felt herself to be when Lestocq

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had scared her into action with his allegorical drawings. She was less easy to scare than Elizabeth ; but she was more ambitious—readier to believe, in short, that the best way out was the way on, and to consider the friendship of friends and the love of lovers from the point of view of the use which could be made of them. It was borne in upon her that, just as some men achieve their ambitions through the favour of women, so some women may achieve theirs through the favour of Guardsmen—and that the Orlofs were instruments made to her hand. They were stupid enough not to be the obvious objects of suspicion, but shrewd enough to know how to exploit military jealousies—the jealousies, in particular, which subsisted between the Guard and Peter's Holstein troops.¹ If their wits were not specially sharp, their nerves were imperturbable. Their rôle was to corrupt the Guard with drink, ready money, and lavish promises ; and they knew that the Guard had no objection to being corrupted, but was proud of its tradition as a Prætorian force which could make Emperors and unmake them.

So the days passed, and the intrigues proceeded ; and the Empress, lying on her death-bed, soothing her last hours with cherry brandy,—unless it was with brandied cherries,—was pressed to do and to say this, that, and the other thing, in order to commit her successors. Now

¹ Germans, and therefore unpopular with Russians

ACCESSION OF PETER III

Ivan Schouvalof had her ear ; now her confessor, to whom Panin had breathed suggestions. Probably what happened was not exactly what anybody wanted. Certainly it was not exactly what Catherine and the Orlofs wanted—nor was it exactly what Peter wanted. Husband and wife would each have preferred to see the other pushed aside ; instead of which, a last attempt was made to make the peace between them. There was to be no question of any alternative heir, no question of a regency. Grand Duke and Grand Duchess were brought together to the bedside of the dying Empress ; and the Empress murmured the words which the priest prompted—

“ That she had always loved them ; and that, with her dying breath, she wished them all kinds of blessings.”

Then, on 5th January 1762, she died ; and there was no revolution as yet, and no diversion—as those best informed had expected that there would be—of the agreed order of succession. Peter, in due course, received the formal message that the Empress “ commanded him to live long ” ; and he ascended the throne as Peter III., and was recognised by the Senate before the Guard had time to speak.

CHAPTER VIII

Policy of Peter III.—Ill-treatment of Catherine—Her Conspiracy

EVERYTHING, so far, had happened normally ; the normal course being, after all, the line of least resistance. The conspirators were not of one mind as to what they wanted. There were too many collateral or inter-related conspiracies for any one conspiracy to prevail. The conspiracy of which Panin was the soul was not quite identical with the conspiracy in which the Orlofs were the moving spirits. There were wheels within wheels—conspiracies within conspiracies. No one was quite ready, at the critical moment, to translate conspiracy into action. Catherine herself was unready, for an interesting reason. She was about to become the mother of a child¹ of which Gregory Orlof is presumed to have been the father. The result was that all the conspirators alike found themselves confronted with an accomplished fact : the accession, and the acceptance, without conditions, of Peter III. The Archbishop of Novgorod preached a suitable sermon,

¹ Brought up under the name of Bobrinski.

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exclaiming, with suitable gestures, and in a suitable tone of voice, “Happy Russia ! God has exalted the chosen of His people.”

So far, so good ; and if Peter had been strong, or discreet, or well-advised, his accession might have been the end of his troubles instead of the beginning of them. But Peter, as we know, had none of these qualities. It did not much matter whether he was well or ill advised, because he would not listen to advice. He was weak, but stubborn, after the manner of drunkards ; a fool with interfering propensities. It did not occur to him that anything he did could have any consequences other than he intended ; and his attitude towards his Empire was like that of a child towards a new toy—he wanted to try experiments with it for which it was not designed, and to pull it to pieces in order to see the wheels go round. His position was not strong enough to stand that strain ; and he himself was neither strong enough to repair his errors nor keen-witted enough to see them.

Some of his measures were commendable ; so that a partisan could make out a case for him. It could be argued that he was clement because he recalled political exiles from Siberia—Biren, Munnich, Lestocq, and various others. It could be argued that he loved his people because he reduced the tax on salt, and that he was broad-minded because he exempted the nobility from the obligation, previously im-

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posed upon all of them, to serve the State either as soldiers or as civil servants. But the argument would have little value. The most praiseworthy of Peter's reforms were not really thought out. One can discover no guiding idea behind them—nothing but a love of change for its own sake; and they proceeded concurrently with other changes, and other lines of policy, which gave offence. In his drunken, pig-headed way, almost without knowing what he did,—and certainly without weighing the consequences of what he did,—Peter flung out challenges in all directions: a challenge to Russian sentiment; a challenge to the Russian army; a challenge, above all, to Catherine. Owing to the impression created by the two former challenges, the last was taken up with an energy which surprised him.

One of the objects of the Revolution of 1741, it will be remembered, had been to put an end to the exploitation of Russia by Germans. Peter reversed that policy, and made haste to recall Prussians from exile, and to give high command to Marshal Munnich. The one enthusiasm of which he was capable was enthusiasm for Frederick the Great. He made no secret of his ambition to go to war, with Frederick the Great for his commander-in-chief; and, as a step towards that end, he at once stopped the war in which Russia and Prussia were then engaged. At the same time, he proceeded to reform Russian military discipline on the

PETER III

Prussian model ; raised his uncle, Prince George of Holstein, to the chief command ; and substituted a Holstein regiment for his previous bodyguard. Nothing could have been more unpopular. If the hornet's nest was not actually stirred, at least it was humming with anger and in a state in which it would take very little to stir it. It was, indeed, as if Peter had simultaneously given Catherine a grievance and put a weapon into her hands. We shall see how she snatched at the weapon and used it.

The trouble seems to have been simmering even when Peter's subjects were swearing allegiance to him—

“ The hearts of the greater number of them were filled with grief, and with hatred and contempt for their future Emperor ; but their fears and their sense of their weakness overbore these emotions. They all made haste to submit even before the Empress's eyes were closed.”

So M. Breteuil reports ; and a few days later he has something to say about the new Emperor's personal habits—

“ The Emperor is leading the most shocking life. He spends all his evenings in smoking and drinking beer. He continues these diversions until five or six o'clock in the morning, by which time he is nearly always dead drunk.”

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Elsewhere we find the gaieties of the Palace compared with those of a guardroom, and read of the admission of actresses to the Imperial revels—actresses of the baser sort, who behaved with the audacious familiarity of such, even in the presence of ladies-in-waiting and maids-of-honour. It is said that the wisest of Peter's decrees were drafted for him by clerks while he was engaged in these uproarious nocturnal recreations, and that he signed them in the morning without the dimmest appreciation of their bearing. Some of the stories belonging to this category have, of course, been denied, and some of them may not be true; but we may safely trust the impression which they convey. Peter's most thoroughgoing advocates never get further than denying that he was drunk on a particular occasion. They never venture to assert that he was sober on the whole, but leave us our picture of the throne of Peter the Great now occupied by Peter the Impossible.

And Peter the Impossible was also Peter the Bully; and the principal victim of his brutalities was his wife. That too is clear from M. de Breteuil's dispatches—

“ The position of the Empress is very cruel. She is treated with the most marked contempt. She bears with great patience the Emperor's insults and the haughty airs of Mlle Vorontsof. It will be strange to me if this princess,

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whom I know to be brave and energetic, is not presently tempted to some desperate course. I know friends of hers who are trying to calm her, but who would nevertheless risk their lives for her if she desired it.”

That already on 18th January. By 15th February M. de Breteuil has begun to put dots on the i’s—

“ The Emperor has only seen his son once since his accession. Many people are of opinion that if his mistress should have a child, he would marry her, and make the child his heir. But the epithets which Mlle Vorontsof has applied to him in the course of a quarrel are very reassuring from this point of view.”

And then on 14th April we read—

“ You know, of course, that M. de Soltikof is the real father of the Grand Duke. This M. de Soltikof was recalled by the Emperor soon after his accession, and is being treated by him with great distinction. After his return, it is said, the Emperor sent for him several times, and had several long conversations with him. Persons in the intimacy of the Empress believe that his purpose was to induce him to confess that he had enjoyed the princess’s favours.”

And then, only two days later—

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“ The Emperor has been to see Ivan.”

These extracts give us the skeleton of the plot which was proceeding and was to provoke the counterplot. Soltikof was to be induced, whether by threats or promises, to acknowledge himself the father of the Grand Duke Paul. On the strength of that confession, Paul was to be denounced as illegitimate and Catherine to be divorced. Peter would then marry Elizabeth Vorontsof, and raise her to the throne in Catherine's place. If Elizabeth failed to give him an heir, then Ivan was to be fetched from his prison and adopted ; while Catherine was to be immured in a nunnery, with a shaven head. Catherine, in short, was being manœuvred into just the same dilemma which had faced the Empress Elizabeth in 1741. She would have to choose between a nunnery and a throne ; and she was not the woman to prefer the nunnery.

Exactly what hindered the execution of Peter's plan one cannot confidently say. Presumably a good many circumstances conspired to hinder it. There may have been difficulties with Soltikof, who may have had honourable scruples, and hesitated to make a public boast of a lady's favours. There certainly were difficulties with Ivan, who proved to be of unsound mind, and therefore unlikely to arouse the enthusiasm of the populace if the populace were allowed to see too much of him. Peter went to see him in his prison, and formed that

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impression. Catherine's friends, too, may have exercised a restraining influence; while Peter's drunken habits, and intermittent quarrels with his mistress, may have interfered with the continuity of his policy.

In spite of Ivan, and in spite of Soltikof, his scheme might have succeeded if he had had the sense to keep sober and silent. Instead of that, he was noisy, violent, and irresolute; preluding action with menace; letting "I dare not" wait upon "I would"; and pursuing Catherine with a campaign of coarse insults which attracted widespread attention, and enlisted sympathy on her side. He summoned guests from her table to join a supper which he was giving to his mistress. He forbade her to take snuff, and deprived her of her snuff-box. He deprived her of fruit at her meals, for no other reason than because he knew that she liked it. He paid pointed attention to his mistress in her presence, and at a great dinner-party, at which four hundred guests were present, he called her a fool¹—shouting the word down the table at the top of his voice. And then, as a culminating outrage, came the threat to divorce her, and shave her head, and send her to a nunnery.

There can be little doubt that he really meant to do it; and the orthodox must make what they can of the fact that, while the monks

¹ One so translates the word, but the expression actually used was much coarser.

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were shrieking with horror at Peter's schemes for the confiscation of ecclesiastical property, no ecclesiastic voice was raised in protest against the proposal to use a nunnery as a state prison for the repudiated spouse of a dissolute sovereign. Perhaps they will urge that it ill becomes the orthodox to be, morally or spiritually, in advance of their times ; perhaps that a little convent discipline would have been to Catherine's advantage. But Catherine was not the sort of woman to fall in with that view. If she had to choose between a nunnery and a revolution, she would prefer the revolution. If her husband came to a bad end in the revolutionary turmoil, so much the worse for him. He had begun the game of bowls, and he must take his chance of the rubbers.

So Catherine argued ; so also argued those about her ; so especially argued Gregory and Alexis Orlof. It has been said that they were both her lovers — but, if so, they were like the lovers of the Empress Elizabeth, “colleagues rather than rivals,” and not in the least jealous of each other. Their plans—such simple plans as they thought necessary—were formed. The goodwill of the Guard had been bought — the French Ambassador had been asked (though he had refused) to lend money for the purpose. The hour had come to strike. Alexis Orlof knocked at Catherine's door to announce it, in the same simple and matter-of-fact style in which he might have

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announced that dinner was ready, or that the carriage was waiting—

“ It is time to get up. We are prepared to proclaim you Empress.”

But now we must go back a little, and see what had been happening to bring about this sudden crisis.

CHAPTER IX

The Revolution of 1762—The March against Peter

CONSPIRACY, as we have noted, came, for the first time, to the surface when Catherine heard a tap, at two o'clock in the morning, at her bedroom door ; and the conspiracy which then emerged was not Panin's conspiracy but Orlof's. It emerged prematurely, and translated itself precipitately into action, because it was clear that otherwise it would be dragged to light and crushed.

The Guard had been corrupted in part, but not entirely. There was some misunderstanding as to who was in the plot and who was not. A certain Captain Passik made the mistake of speaking of it in the presence of a soldier who had a grievance against him on account of punishments inflicted for breaches of discipline, and the soldier seized the opportunity to avenge himself. He denounced Passik to his superiors, and Passik was arrested. A courier was dispatched to the Emperor with the news. The danger was imminent that Passik's secret would be extorted from him, together with the names

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of his confederates, by means of the thumbscrew and the rack.

Passik's disappearance, however, was at once remarked, for the confederates had taken the precaution of setting a special spy to shadow each of the leaders of the movement. The arrest took place at nine o'clock in the evening, and a quarter of an hour later Princess Dashkof was informed of it through a Piedmontese adventurer named Odart. This was the one moment at which she was, and had to be, something more than the fly on the wheel. Everything, for a brief space, hinged upon her resource and energy; and, girl though she was, she proved herself equal to her task. First of all, she knocked up Panin; and we need not stop to inquire into the truth of the report that she had previously inveigled Panin into the conspiracy by consenting to become his mistress. The essential fact is that Panin was too fat—perhaps also too timorous—to be hurried. He temporised; he made long speeches; he spoke of the horrors of civil war; and he went back to bed. But Princess Dashkof did not go to bed.

It was now nearly midnight; and time pressed, for the courier was already well on his way to Peter's headquarters with the news of Passik's arrest. Many other arrests—enough of them to paralyse the movement—would inevitably follow if the conspirators waited for the dawn; but Princess Dashkof did not wait

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for it. She slipped instantly into her disguise of male attire, and ran out to look for the Orlofs. She was accustomed to meet them, as it were by accident, on one of the city bridges ; and there, by good fortune, she found them, and told them her story. According to her own statement, she then scrawled a note—“ Come at once ; the matter is urgent ”—and bade one of them gallop with it to Catherine ; but that is doubtful. It was their own conspiracy ; and they may be presumed to have known how to conduct it without waiting for directions from a girl of eighteen. At all events, they acted—and acted at once—without much further reference to her.

Neither Peter nor Catherine, it is to be noted, was then at St. Petersburg. He, as has been said, was at Oranienbaum—a summer seat, some distance down the Neva, opposite the island fortress of Cronstadt. She was at her summer seat at Peterhof, which lies on the way from Oranienbaum to St. Petersburg ; and she was sleeping, for reasons of her own, not in the Palace itself, but in a chalet in the garden. She could get to St. Petersburg, we must observe, more rapidly than Peter could ; and messengers from St. Petersburg to her had a shorter distance to travel than messengers to him—an important circumstance in view of the race against time which was now beginning. .

With Peter at Oranienbaum were the members of his Court, and also his Holstein

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troops ; and we know that between them and the Guard, stationed at St. Petersburg, a keen jealousy, not to say a violent animosity, subsisted. He was preparing to undertake a war, in the interest of his Holstein possessions, against Denmark. He had been warned that such a war would be exceedingly unpopular in Russia ; but he was obstinate, and would not listen to warnings. Vague rumours of discontent and sedition in the capital reached his ears, but did not trouble him. He was amply supplied with beer and tobacco, and was enjoying himself.

“ All this sort of thing,” reported the French Chargé d’Affaires, “ does not prevent the Emperor from living with absolute freedom from anxiety. He spends his time in drilling his soldiers, giving balls, and arranging operatic entertainments. He has taken all the prettiest women in St. Petersburg with him. I observe their husbands pacing the gardens of the capital with melancholy countenances.”

That was written on 6th July, and two days later the storm burst.

Peter received the news of Passik’s arrest, but did not appreciate its significance. All was well, he argued, because Passik was locked up. Time enough to deal with Passik when he had finished his debauch, and slept off its effects. He did not know that Passik, before

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they lodged him in his dungeon, had found a means of passing a friend a pencilled note : “ You must act without delay, or all is lost ” ; and he knew and suspected nothing of Princess Dashkof’s midnight conference with the Orlofs on the bridge. He had arranged to go to Peterhof to celebrate the fête of his patron saint ; and he duly set out for Peterhof with his suite, which included seventeen of the pretty women above referred to.

It is said to have been his intention, on arriving at Peterhof, to proceed, at last, to the arrest of his wife, and the shaving of her head, with a view to her long-contemplated relegation to a nunnery ; but whether that was actually so or not one cannot say. Whatever his intentions, he was too late to execute them. His nominal object in going to Peterhof was to keep the festival with the Empress ; but no Empress was there to receive him. He arrived at eight, but she had departed at two —none of the scared servants who were questioned could tell him why or whither. And that, of course, brings us back to the picture of Alexis Orlof tapping at her bedroom door, and waking Catherine from her slumbers with the news that everything was ready for her proclamation as Empress.

“ Passik is arrested,” he explained. “ There is no time to lose. I have a carriage waiting for you.”

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Hearing that, Catherine dressed as quickly as she could, and got into the carriage with her maid. Alexis Orlof drove, and another officer sat behind as a footman. When the carriage broke down on the rough road, they impressed a country cart in place of it. Meeting the French barber, who was on his way to dress the Empress's hair for the Emperor's dinner-party, they picked him up and took him with them, so that he might not gossip. Approaching St. Petersburg, they found Gregory Orlof and Prince Bariatinski waiting for them; and so the wild gallop continued until they reached the barracks of the Ismailofski regiment, where the soldiers, half dressed and only half awake, quickly gathered round them, cheering.

That was the end of the race through the white night of a northern midsummer, with a crown for the prize and the gallows as the penalty of failure. For a moment Catherine doubted whether she had really won the race. Very few soldiers were visible as yet; and soldiers in night-shirts inspire less confidence than soldiers in uniform. They were hurrying from their beds, however, dressing as they came; and Catherine did not wait for them to finish dressing before she began to harangue them—seizing her first chance to prove her metal, and proving it conclusively.

She had heard, she said, of their devotion; and she had come to throw herself on their protection. The Emperor had threatened her

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life—her life and her son's life also. The order for their execution had been issued,—the assassins were already on their way,—etc. etc. It may not have been quite true, but the Guardsmen believed it, and they understood that vodka would presently flow like water in their barracks; so they shouted till the rafters rang, while Catherine called for a priest to consecrate her usurpation.

And that as a matter of course. For, whatever priests may think, the rulers of the earth always look upon the Church as a branch of the Civil Service, and regard the clergy as humble, though useful, functionaries whose business it is to pray as they are told. That was Catherine's view of them, and the soldiers shared it. They fetched the regimental chaplain from his bed, and hustled him down into the barrack yard—soldiers on each side of him, gripping him firmly by the arm. They told him what to pray for, and he prayed for it. They told him to hold out the cross to be kissed, and he obeyed them. They swore allegiance on the sacred emblem; and then they formed a procession, bidding the priest carry the cross aloft, and pushing him along in front.

That at the very hour at which Peter was searching Peterhof in vain, vaguely realising his peril, and crying to Elizabeth Vorontsof in his despair, “Romanovna, will you believe me now? Catherine has made her escape. I told you that she was capable of anything.” And

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truly Catherine was capable of a great deal—capable of more even than Peter had guessed in the days when, grateful to her for having got him out of some small difficulty, he had christened her *Madame la Ressource*. For while Peter was raising the hue and cry through the corridors and grounds of her summer pleasure-house, Catherine was marching from barracks to barracks in his capital, recruiting fresh adherents everywhere, releasing Passik from his prison as she marched.

Only at the Preobrajenski barracks was there a momentary show of resistance. Elizabeth Vorontsof's brother Simon was a captain in that regiment. He and a Major Voieikof meant to be loyal to their Emperor. They harangued their men, and led them forth, thinking to arrest Catherine, and met her force in front of the Kazan church. Street fighting seemed imminent; but not all the officers, and very few of the men, were willing to follow their leaders. One of them tried what a sudden shout would do to break down discipline. “Hurrah! The Empress! The Empress!” he cried; and the cry was taken up, and the force of discipline was broken. Vorontsof and Voieikof could only break their swords and submit to be arrested. Their men joined forces with the mutineers; and all of them streamed together into the church, where they first swore allegiance, and then knelt in prayer. Panin, who had been too fat to act precipitately, was not too fat to

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slip down from his fence and pray on the winning side.

Prayer finished, the procession was resumed. Catherine's followers were now eighteen thousand strong, and in undisputed possession of the city. Some of them began to loot the house of the unpopular Prince George of Holstein ; but that was quickly stopped. The rest escorted Catherine to the Winter Palace, where the Senate and the Holy Synod arrived to pay their homage. Catherine sat down to dinner at an open window amid the plaudits. She lifted her glass and pledged the multitude, whose ringing cheers continued to resound. The Revolution, as the British Ambassador reported to his Government, had been effected in a couple of hours—between seven and nine o'clock in the morning—without the shedding of a single drop of blood ; no material damage having been done, except that the rings of Princess George had been torn from her fingers, and the windows of a few wine-shops had been broken. Already the printing-presses were at work, and in the course of the morning manifestoes came pouring forth from them—

“ Her Imperial Majesty, having to-day ascended the throne of All the Russias in response to the unanimous wishes and pressing solicitations of all her faithful subjects and all true patriots of this Empire, has given orders that the news of the event shall be communicated to all

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the Foreign Ministers residing at her Court, and that they shall be assured that Her Imperial Majesty desires to maintain friendly relations with the sovereigns, their masters. The Ministers will be informed, at the earliest possible moment, on what day it will be convenient for them to present their compliments to Her Imperial Majesty and offer their congratulations.”

That was the form of the intimation received at the Embassies and Legations. Other manifestoes, setting forth that Peter had been dethroned in consequence of his neglect of Russian interests and his contempt for Russian institutions, were simultaneously addressed to the Russian people. It was a bold and prompt beginning ; but it remained to be seen whether Peter’s deposition would be more than provisional. The criticism has been passed on him that he let himself be deposed as easily as a naughty child lets itself be sent to bed without its supper ; but it could, by no means, be foreseen that he would do so.

Peter was not alone, but had fifteen hundred soldiers with him. They were Holstein men, assembled for the projected war with Denmark, and it was to be presumed that he could trust them. There were other Russian troops in Pomerania, and it might be that he could also reckon on them. For commander-in-chief he had Marshal Munnich ; and Marshal Munnich was a formidable warrior. He had beaten the

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Grand Turk in his time, and he might very well smash Catherine and her party now. It would not do, at any rate, for Catherine to sit still on her throne, regarding the battle as won. The only measure so far taken had been to guard the roads so as to prevent any messenger from carrying the news of what had happened to Oranienbaum ; but there was reason to believe that a messenger had got through before the roads were closed.

That made it doubly desirable to act at once. So now that the first excitement was over, and the first *Te Deum* had been sung, a council of war was called in the Palace ; and while the exuberant soldiers were swilling their vodka, and playing football with their discarded Prussian accoutrements in the streets and barrack yards, all possible courses were debated, and the boldest course was chosen : to sound the “ boot and saddle,” and march on Oranienbaum without loss of time—Catherine at the head of her men in military uniform, with Princess Dashkof, also in military uniform, by her side.

CHAPTER X

Surrender of Peter—His Deposition by Death in Prison—
By whose Order was he killed

THE first messenger to reach Peter was a French footman who had not understood the sights which he had witnessed. Arriving at the moment when the Emperor was searching for the Empress under the bed and in the linen closets, he reported that there was no need to search further—that the Empress was not lost, but was at St. Petersburg; that the entire garrison was under arms, making magnificent preparations to celebrate the festival of Peter's patron saint. While Peter was wondering what to make of that story, however, and how to reconcile it with the story of Catherine's sudden flight in the small hours, a second messenger entered, bowing low, bowing repeatedly, making the sign of the cross, and finally delivering a letter which, he said, he had been instructed to place in the Emperor's own hands. Peter first read the note to himself, and then read it aloud. It ran thus—

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“The regiments of the Guard are in revolt, and the Empress has placed herself at their head. It is now nine o’clock. She is on the point of entering the Kazan church. The entire populace appears to be taking part in the movement. The loyal subjects of Your Majesty are afraid to show themselves.”

“I told you so,” was fuddled Peter’s luminous comment, but no strenuous action followed the remark. Vorontsof, his Grand Chancellor, proposed to go to St. Petersburg to remonstrate with the Empress, and that offer was accepted. “It is not I who am doing this. It is the Russian nation,” was Catherine’s answer to Vorontsof’s remonstrances; and the Grand Chancellor, observing the attitude of the mob and the army, thought it well to temporise. He suggested that Catherine should place him under arrest, and charge one of her officers to keep an eye on him. She did as he asked, and he made himself comfortable, happy in the thought that whoever triumphed, the victor would have no case against him. Other men of mark who rode off from Peterhof to St. Petersburg on the same errand were Prince Troubetskoi and Alexander Schouvalof; and they also neglected to return.

That was Peter’s first hint that things were not what they seemed — that pillars of substantial appearance could crumble, and seemingly solid forces melt away. He called for vodka,

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and drank it—and then called for more vodka, and drank that. He paced the garden, cursing and swearing, and appealing to those who loved him to go and kill the Empress. He called for a secretary, and dictated manifestoes. He set the ladies and gentlemen of his Court to work copying the manifestoes. He ordered hussars to gallop off and distribute them among the peasantry; he sent other hussars to scour the St. Petersburg roads for news; and he summoned his Holstein troops from Oranienbaum, bidding them not forget the artillery. And then Marshal Munnich spoke.

He was an octogenarian, and he had spent twenty years in exile in Siberia; but he remembered how he had hammered the Turks of old, and he stepped to the front now as the one man who was not afraid, but had kept his head and had wit enough to form a plan. It would be futile, he urged, to stay at Peterhof. Twenty thousand men would be thundering at the gates of Peterhof before it could be put in a state of defence—resistance there could only result in massacre. But Cronstadt was near; and the fleet and the garrison were loyal—a courier had just ridden in to say so. To Cronstadt first, then, and thence back, with overwhelming forces, to St. Petersburg and victory. A yacht was ready to weigh anchor.

It was the best course, if not the boldest; but Peter would not take it. He had been drinking vodka—tossing off glass after glass of

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it—and the strong drink had given him a stubborn drunken courage. He remembered that he was a soldier, and spoke as he conceived that a soldier ought to speak. He declared that he would fight where he stood—that it was absurd to run away from the enemy before they came in sight. The courtiers reasoned with him—even the Court jester made serious representations, but he swore at them, and called them cowards, and began to make his tactical dispositions, giving orders that certain low hills should be occupied.

But then, at eight o'clock in the evening, the whole day having been thus lost, there came fresh news. An aide-de-camp galloped up with the report that Catherine and the Guards were marching on Peterhof—that their scouts might come in sight at any moment. At that the Emperor's drunken courage collapsed. He and his scared Court ran in a sudden panic to the water-side. Men and women together, they tumbled into the yachts, hoisted the sails, and put out the oars, and made what haste they could, following in terror the course which Munnich had urged them to take with a bold heart. But they had delayed, and the delay was their undoing. In the morning—or even in the early afternoon—Cronstadt might have been Peter's; but by this time it was already Catherine's. It had been a race against time: Catherine had had the longer distance to cover; but Catherine had started first. At

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the council of war which had settled the march on Peterhof, Cronstadt had not been forgotten. It had been remembered late in the day, but it had been remembered at last ; and, when it was remembered, instant action was taken. Admiral Talitzin had been sent off alone, in a swift cutter, to win the garrison over to Catherine's side ; and he had discharged his errand. The Governor of Cronstadt was under arrest, and Talitzin was in command. So when the yachts arrived at ten o'clock and tried to land, there passed this dialogue—

“ Who goes there ? ”

“ The Emperor.”

“ We have no Emperor any longer.”

“ But it is I. Don't you recognise me ? ”

“ Pass away there. Pass away.”

So Peter passed away, hearing the garrison cheer for Catherine as he passed ; but he could not return to Peterhof, for Catherine was already there, sitting down to supper in the pleasure-house from which Alexis Orlof had fetched her to take possession of the throne, just twenty hours before. “ I told you so,” he repeated. “ I foresaw this plot from the very first day of my reign ” ; and then, while the frivolous ladies of the party pleasantly sang, *Qu'allions-nous faire dans cette galère?* he summoned Munnich to his cabin, and asked him for advice. The marshal replied that, though Cronstadt was lost, Revel was still loyal.

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“Row to Revel without losing an instant. Pick up a ship-of-war there, and sail to Prussia. You have an army there. You can return to Russia at the head of eighty thousand men, and in six weeks you will have won your Empire back again.”

So the marshal urged ; but the women and the courtiers protested. Revel, they said, was too far—the oarsmen were too tired. Besides, very likely the reports of the revolt were exaggerated. It was incredible that the whole Empire had risen in revolt; and it was undignified for an Emperor to quit the country like a fugitive. The Empress, no doubt, had her party, but she only wanted to make terms. *Et cetera*; and it was to the voice of the women and the courtiers that Peter listened. Very well, he said. Since it was impossible to return to Peterhof, he would land at Oranienbaum. He landed there, in the early morning, and learnt that Catherine and her army were still advancing.

His first impulse was to mount his horse, and ride hard for Poland; but this time Elizabeth Vorontsof dissuaded him. She was ambitious, and had no fancy to be the consort of a dispossessed sovereign in exile; and she had a happy thought. Just as Revel had remained after Cronstadt was lost, so now, though Russia was lost, the Grand Duchy of Holstein remained. If Peter would resign the Empire, Catherine might be willing to leave him

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the Grand Duchy, and she herself could contrive to be happy as a Grand Duchess. The experiment was worth trying, and she persuaded Peter to try it. He shut himself up and wrote to Catherine. He came out and gave the order to dismantle the Oranienbaum fortifications. And then there followed a final and fearful interview with heroic old Marshal Munnich, who stamped his foot and foamed at the mouth with rage—

“What! You’re not going to put yourself at the head of your troops, and die like an Emperor! If you’re afraid of being hurt, hang on to a crucifix. Nobody will dare to touch you then, and I’ll do the fighting for you myself.”

So the angry veteran thundered; but there was to be no fighting except by a few loyal peasants armed with scythes, whom Gregory Orlof scornfully scattered with the flat of his sword. Peter absolutely refused to fight, but sent his letter instead, and received in reply an invitation to sign the following Act of Abdication:—

“During the brief period of my absolute reign over the Russian Empire, I have discovered that I am not on a level with my task, but am incapable of governing that Empire either as a sovereign ruler or in any fashion whatsoever. I have also observed its decline, and the imminent peril of its complete collapse, which would have covered me with eternal

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disgrace. After mature deliberation, therefore, acting under no compulsion, I solemnly declare, before Russia, and before the Universe, that I resign the government of the said Empire for ever; that I have no desire to rule over it, whether as absolute ruler or under any other form of constitution; and that I will never seek to do so by means of any support that I may be able to obtain. In faith whereof I make oath, before God and the Universe, having written and signed this Act of Abdication with my own hand."

29, June, 1762 [C. S.]

Peter copied out the humiliating document, and subscribed his name to it. That is the action which his critics have in mind when they say that he abdicated after the manner of a naughty child, overawed, confessing its fault, and submitting to be slapped and sent to bed. The officer to whom he handed the Act of Abdication said that his orders were to arrest him and take him to Peterhof; and Peter acquiesced in that proposal also. The Order which he wore was removed from his breast. He was placed in a carriage, together with his mistress and his aide-de-camp, and driven off. The soldiers on the road raised cheers for Catherine as he passed.

It was not Catherine who received him—her attitude was like that of the litigant who stands aside on the ground that the matter in dispute has passed out of his hands into those



M. Queen sc.

*Peter III of Russia
Catherine's Husband*



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of his solicitor. This matter was in the hands of the soldiers; and their hands were rough. They sent off Peter's aide-de-camp in one direction and his mistress in another; they turned out Peter's pockets, scattering handfuls of diamonds on the ground. "Now undress," they said; and Peter stood, on the grand staircase of his own Palace, barefooted, clad only in his shirt, a miserable object of mockery, crying like a child. Then at last they threw a shabby cloak over him, and drove him off to Ropscha, where he was to be confined. According to one account, he asked that his mistress, his negro servant, and his monkey might accompany him. According to another account, he begged only for a bottle of Burgundy and a pipe. They gave him, at any rate, a Bible and a pack of cards; and he proceeded to beguile the time by building toy fortresses.

Catherine, meanwhile, returned to St. Petersburg in triumph, to reward her friends and forgive her enemies. The promised stream of vodka flowed in the barrack yards and in the streets, at a cost of forty-one thousand roubles. Princess Dashkof was given twenty-five thousand roubles; and her sister and the other members of her family were pardoned in consideration of her services, though Elizabeth Vorontsof was required to hand over her jewels. Orlof swaggered about, boasting that he had made the Empress, and could unmake her, until either Panin or the Hetman of the Cossacks brought

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him to his senses with the remark that, if he presumed too far, there were those who would hang him on a gallows as high as Haman's within a week. Even Marshal Munnich, thoroughly sick of Peter at last, transferred his allegiance, and was well received. "So you were going to fight against me?" Catherine asked him. "Yes, madam; but henceforward I hope to fight in your defence," was his diplomatic answer.

Still, all was not yet over. The Holstein soldiers had, indeed, been disarmed, and locked up in cattle-sheds and lumber-rooms until it should be convenient to send them home; but there were other sources from which trouble seemed likely to arise. There were good Russians, taken by surprise, who now remembered that Catherine was a German, whereas the husband whom she had dethroned was of the family of Peter the Great. Even at St. Petersburg some of these jeered at the Guards, asking them, "Who sold his Emperor for two roubles?" and the Guard showed signs of shame; while, at Moscow, soldiers and populace alike refused to cheer Catherine even when the Governor called upon them to do so, or, at all events, only cheered her under compulsion. It could not be said that all was over except the shouting when the shouting itself lacked spontaneity. There would still be a party for Peter as long as Peter lived; and therefore——

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The inference was obvious—Peter would have to die. While Peter sat in his prison at Ropscha, clamouring in vain for his monkey, his mistress, and his negro, swilling his Burgundy, smoking his pipe, reading his Bible, and building toy fortresses with his pack of cards, that inference was being drawn in the Palace at St. Petersburg. It took six days to draw it. A message from Peter to the effect that, “disgusted at the wickedness of mankind, he was resolved henceforward to devote himself to a philosophical life,” made no difference to the drawing of it. Who drew it?

That is another of the unsolved mysteries of history which no one will ever solve. No one ever confessed; and the secrets of Russian prisons are well guarded. The only absolutely incredible version of the story is the official version—that Peter died suddenly of “hemorrhoidal colic.” No one has ever believed that statement, and some sardonic comments on it have been preserved. D’Alembert was presently to decline Catherine’s invitation to visit Russia on the ground, as he told a friend, that “fatal colics are too frequent in that country”; and we have also Princess Dashkof’s account of her first interview with the Empress after her reception of the news—

“I could not bring myself to enter the Palace until the following day. I then found the Empress with a dejected air, visibly labour-

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ing under much uneasiness of mind. These were her words when she addressed me: 'My horror at this death is inexpressible; it is a blow which strikes me to the earth.' 'It is a death too sudden, madam,' replied I, 'for your glory and for mine.'"

But Princess Dashkof acquits Catherine of all knowledge of the crime, and Frederick the Great took the same view in a conversation with M. de Ségur. Neither of them knew the facts, of course; but the Princess knew Catherine, and it seems safer to base conjecture on Catherine's character than to assume the worst and infer Catherine's character therefrom. Unless she was cruel and vindictive on this one occasion, she was very far from being a cruel and vindictive woman; nor was she, so far as one can judge, a woman to be impelled to crime by fear. But she was a woman in the hands of men; a German in the hands of Russians; a stranger in a land which had not outgrown the traditions of savagery—a land in which one Emperor had fried his enemies in frying-pans and another had knouted his own son to death, and both were styled "the Great."

If she had dropped a hint, or uttered a nervously impatient word—if she had said anything even remotely resembling Henry II.'s "Who will rid me of this turbulent priest?"—then those about her would have been fairly

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sure to act on it before she had time to unsay it ; while others—her friend Panin, for instance, the fat, plausible, oleaginous intriguer,—the Count Fosco, as it were, of the conspiracy,—would have been ready to rub their soapy, self-complacent hands, and propose to make the best of a bad job, which might turn out to be a blessing in disguise. But it is not even necessary to suppose the hint to have been given. Catherine, in the view of a good many of the conspirators, was still a figure-head rather than a leader ; and they were quite capable of acting without consulting her, on the ground that she who willed the end must also will the means.

It was Alexis Orlof who acted—not, one may be sure, on his own sole responsibility, but on whose orders, or at whose suggestion, it is quite impossible to say. The time came when he shuddered at the recollection of the deed, and protested that he had only done it under constraint—an unwilling instrument, cruelly assigned a shameful and painful part. But that was long afterwards, when manners were milder and more polished, and probably also on a day on which he had drunk too freely. There is no indication of qualms or reluctance in the contemporary records of the deed ; and though there are certain minor discrepancies in those records, there is complete unanimity as to the essential facts.

Peter, as has been said, was in prison at

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Ropscha—"a pleasant place," as Catherine wrote to Poniatowski, which he was only intended to occupy provisionally, while still more pleasant quarters were being prepared for him at Schlüsselburg. He sat in his cell, with his pipe and his bowl and his playing cards, some French novels and a German Bible, when the door opened, and Alexis Orlof entered, attended by one Tieplof, who was attached to Catherine in some secretarial capacity. Alexis, it is to be noted, was the strongest of the Orlofs, who were all men of exceptional physical strength—a veritable Sandow or Hackenschmidt among men.

They entered cheerily, professing to bring good news. It was all right, they said, and there was nothing to be afraid of. The order for the prisoner's release would soon be made out—they had come to tell him so. Meanwhile, they begged permission to dine with him; and while dinner was preparing, they proposed a glass of vodka—the customary Russian appetiser. They had brought the vodka with them, and they poured it out; and Peter, suspecting nothing, tossed it off. He had no sooner swallowed it than pains seized him. No matter, said his visitors; it was nothing—the pains would quickly pass. Another drop of vodka—they filled a second glass, and put it to his lips.

But Peter now knew that he had been poisoned, and refused the second draught—and not only refused it, but shrieked aloud for help. His piercing screams rang down the prison

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corridors. His body servant, hearing them, ran in ; but the colossal Alexis flung him out again. Then came two officials. One of them was Prince Bariatinski, just appointed Governor of the prison ; it is uncertain whether the other was Bariatinski's brother or a certain young Potemkin, aged seventeen, of whom we shall hear again. It is also uncertain whether they merely looked on, or rendered active help ; but that does not matter—they were not, in any case, on Peter's side. And Peter was down—on his back—with Alexis, the giant, kneeling on his chest ; and a rope—or it may have been a strap or a napkin—was twisted round Peter's neck, and drawn tighter and tighter till he choked.

It was over ; and Alexis mounted his horse and galloped to Catherine with the news,—or as much of it as he thought it well to communicate,—and we may believe the witnesses who tell us that she showed surprise and horror. She sent for Panin ; and none can say whether she told him more than he knew or whether he already knew more than she could tell him. Panin was not the man to boast of his zeal in such a case, or make admissions which, in some future circumstances, might be used against him. He was the man, rather, to wash his fat hands in imperceptible soap and water, saying that, of course, it was very unfortunate, but that what was done could not be undone, and that the important thing, at the moment, was to consider when, and in what form, the public announce-

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ment of the catastrophe should be made. He advised that the secret should be kept for four-and-twenty hours, and that an edict should then be issued. The edict ran as follows :—

“ By the grace of God, Catherine II., Empress and Autocrat of All the Russias, to all our loving subjects, etc., greeting :—

“ The seventh day of our accession to the throne of All the Russias, we received information that the late Emperor, Peter III., by the means of a bloody accident . . . to which he had been formerly subject, was attacked with a most violent griping colic. That therefore we might not be wanting in Christian duty, nor disobedient to the Divine command, by which we are enjoined to preserve the life of our neighbour, we immediately ordered that the said Peter should be furnished with everything that might be judged necessary to prevent the dangerous consequences of that accident, and to restore his health by the aid of medicine. But, to our great regret and affliction, we were yesterday evening apprised that, by the will of the Almighty, the Emperor departed this life. We have therefore ordered his body to be conveyed to the monastery of Nevski, for interment in that place. At the same time, with our imperial and maternal voice, we exhort our faithful subjects to forgive and forget what is past, to pay the last duties to his body, and to pray to God sincerely for the repose of his soul ;

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willing them, however, to consider this unexpected and sudden death as an especial act of the Providence of God, whose impenetrable decrees are working for us, for our throne, and for our country.”

The document, of course, is the composition not of Catherine, but of her plausible councillor Panin—it is quite possible that Catherine herself got no further than suspecting the true cause of Peter’s death. No doubt, too, it was at Panin’s suggestion that Peter’s body was exposed to public view in the church of the monastery of Alexander Nevski, in spite of the marks of violence, which could not be concealed. For Panin knew his Russia, and knew, therefore, that the only way to prevent some false Peter from cropping up, like the false Demetrius, and making trouble in the provinces, was to give the whole world ocular evidence that Peter was really dead. By that means the most dangerous of possible Pretenders was eliminated—for many years to come, at all events. The only possible rival still remaining, as far as anyone could see, was Ivan ; and the mention of his name brings us to the story of yet another prison tragedy.

CHAPTER XI

The Story of Ivan vi.—His Assassination in Prison.

THE story of Ivan is among the most shameful and painful in Russian annals: one of those stories of man's inhumanity to man, and of terror begetting cruelty, which almost compel despair of human nature.

Ivan was guilty of nothing—there was no pretence that he was guilty of anything, and no charge against him, whether true or false. He had no ambition, and no chance of harbouring any. Whatever was done, or planned, in his name was done or planned without his knowledge; and even that amounted to very little. He appears in history only as the possible figure-head of possible conspiracies. He had been called to the throne as a baby, and swept off it again as a baby in a Revolution directed, not against him, but against the Regent who ruled in his name—the Revolution which resulted in the accession of Elizabeth. But he was the great-grandson of the half-brother of Peter the Great; and claims might, therefore, have been preferred on his behalf. Consequently, he stood

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in the way of the actual rulers—or, at least, might stand there; consequently, they were afraid of him; consequently, his life was one long persecution, beginning, not in boyhood, but in babyhood.

At the time of Elizabeth's Palace Revolution, he was little more than a year old; and he was only four, or possibly five, when he was separated from his parents. They were sent, as we have seen, to the shores of the White Sea, where they died—his mother in 1746, his father not until thirty years later. He was, at first, left at Oranienburg, but afterwards taken to Schlüsselburg, “and there lodged in a casemate of the fortress, the very loophole of which was immediately bricked up”—

“He was never brought out into the open air, and no ray of heaven ever visited his eyes. In this subterranean vault it was necessary to keep a lamp always burning; and as no clock was either to be seen or heard, Ivan knew no difference between day and night. His interior guard, a captain and a lieutenant, were shut up with him; and there was a time when they did not dare to speak to him, not so much as to answer him the simplest question.”

So Tooke writes, rendering the common report; and we may trust the general impression of the picture, even if we hesitate to insist on the details. Ivan, at any rate, had no mother, no

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nurse, no governess, no tutor, no companions of his own age—no one to speak to except gaolers, who, as we have just read, were not allowed to speak to him. It may or may not be true, as has been said, that he was deliberately dosed with drugs till he became imbecile. The whole method of his upbringing made for imbecility, and would account for it. He can hardly be said, indeed, to have been brought up, or even to have been dragged up—he was just kept in captivity and allowed to live.

Physically, according to all reports, he was fairly well developed. There is a description of him as “full six feet high, with a fine blond head of hair, a red beard, regular features”; but mentally he was little more than the beasts of the field. It is doubtful whether he was even taught to read. Of people other than gaolers, of city streets, and of blue skies and green grass, he had only a remote and faded recollection. When he was shifted, as he often was, from place to place, he was conveyed in a covered cart, so that he could neither see nor be seen.

He was once brought, in that way, to Elizabeth at St. Petersburg. Presumably she had some thought, as was whispered, of substituting him for Peter as her heir; but, if she did entertain that idea, she quickly changed her mind again; perhaps because pressure was brought to bear—perhaps because Ivan’s obvious imbecility compelled her. All that one actually knows of the interview is that, when it was over, Eliza-

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beth was found in tears. She was a tender-hearted woman—*âme sensible*—and she probably had not realised before the full extent of the cruelty inflicted in her name. The discovery quite upset her for half an hour or so—but that was all. She pulled herself together, and went back to her card-parties, and masked balls, and brandied cherries ; while Ivan was driven back, still in his covered cart, to his place of detention.

He remained there another six years before there was another incident in his life ; but then Peter III. visited him—he also having it in his mind to make the prisoner his heir. It must have been an amazing interview—Peter the Impossible asking Ivan the Imbecile how his gaolers treated him, and saying that he was very sorry to learn that they did not treat him well ; but the reports of the dialogue which have come down to us cannot be accepted as authentic. The trail of the romancer is over them ; and all that is well established is that Peter promised that Ivan should be better treated in future, and gave orders to that effect. Whatever else he may have thought of doing, he had not done it when the revolution overtook him. Ivan was still in prison when Catherine succeeded to the throne ; and the French Chargé d'Affaires commented sardonically—

“ What a picture it is when one looks at it in cold blood ! The grandson of Peter the Great dethroned and murdered ; the grandson

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of the Emperor Ivan languishing in fetters ; while a Princess of Anhalt usurps the crown of their ancestors, paving the way to the throne by an act of regicide.”

The picture is not quite exact ; but its inaccuracies are not important. Drawn by an impartial observer, it shows us what a good many people thought, and a few of them ventured to say. Ivan was not in chains ; and Catherine, personally, wished him no harm. She adopted, and even extended, Peter’s policy of making Ivan more comfortable. She even spoke of transferring him from a prison to a monastery if the change would give him any satisfaction, and if it could be effected without any danger of the monastery becoming a shrine of sedition and a pivot of disloyalty. But it did not occur to her to release him. It was a matter of course that Ivan should always be in prison—chiefly because he had always been there. Ivan himself probably had grown to expect a prison, more or less as a dog learns to expect a kennel.

He continued, therefore, to be kept in captivity ; and, even in captivity, he continued to be the innocent centre of disaffection for a further period of two years. Catherine had not yet felt her feet in her new position, and was nervous. “The Empress’s fear of losing what she has gained,” reported M. de Breteuil, “is so obvious in her demeanour that any person

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of any account in the country feels himself a strong man in her presence.” She mastered her fears sufficiently to show herself abroad, even at night, with only a small escort; but the nervousness remained, and there probably was enough actual danger to warrant it. Both in St. Petersburg and at Moscow there were riots. Princess Dashkof was suspected of knowing more about them than she chose to tell; and she was ordered to leave Moscow for Riga. Ivan’s name was constantly in the mouths of the seditious; and Ivan had to pay the penalty of a fault which was not his.

One knows what happened; but how it came to happen one can only guess. Whatever was done was almost certainly done without Catherine’s orders, and without her knowledge, by the men in whose hands she had placed herself; but even they did not appear. Perhaps Alexis Orlof felt that one murder, committed with his own hands, sufficed for him. Perhaps he and his brothers, and Panin, and the rest of them, not feeling quite confident of the outcome of the enterprise, preferred to act through agents who could be repudiated. Perhaps, on the other hand, they were only responsible for the order that, whatever happened, Ivan must on no account be allowed to leave his prison alive. Ostensibly, at all events, there was a plot for Ivan’s deliverance; and one can do no more than tell the story of its failure.

The Schlüsselburg prison was guarded by

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a company of the Smolensk regiment ; and one of the sub-lieutenants of that company was a certain Mirovitch—the grandson of an officer implicated in Mazeppa's rebellion. He and a certain Pishkof, whom he took into his confidence, tampered with the men under his command, and persuaded them to join him in an attempt to rescue Ivan from Schlüsselburg and take him to the barracks of the Guards, who were ready, he said, to proclaim him Emperor, just as, two years before, they had proclaimed Catherine Empress. It is possible that he was a fanatical partisan, who meant and believed what he said. It is possible that he expected to be rewarded for his *coup* by the restitution of his family's confiscated estates. It is also possible that he was detailed to his task as an *agent provocateur*—commissioned to create the circumstances in which the order for Ivan's instant execution would have to be carried out by his custodians. That mystery is quite insoluble, and one can only relate what happened.

It was between one and two o'clock in the morning when Mirovitch mustered his men, and led them, first to the arsenal, for munitions, and then to Ivan's cell. The noise disturbed the Governor, who came out to see what was happening ; but Mirovitch hit him on the head with the butt-end of his musket, and then bound him hand and foot. The heavy dungeon door was locked against him ; but he fetched cannon

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from the ramparts, and threatened to blow it down. It was not a door that could withstand artillery ; so the two officers who slept with Ivan in his cell perceived that they would soon be overpowered, and that they must either lose their prisoner or kill him. So they drew their swords.

Ivan the Imbecile, roused from his slumbers by the uproar, understood nothing of what was happening. He knew neither why he was to be taken from his prison, nor why he was to be put to death. He only knew that, though life had never been worth living, he did not want to die. It was his instinct to fight ; and he fought with the desperate fury of a beast at bay. He was unarmed, but he had the strength of a giant. He hit out ; he grappled ; he wrested the sword out of one of his assailants' hands and broke it. But he had enemies behind him as well as in front. He was tripped, and thrown, and bayoneted where he lay, receiving no fewer than eight bayonet wounds before he died ; and then his murderer opened the door, and pointed to his body, saying to Mirovitch—

“ There is your Emperor. Now you can do what you like with him.”

That is the end of Ivan's pitiful story. His body, like Peter's, was exposed to public view, in order that the public might harbour no doubts of his death. It was the second appearance of blood on the steps of Catherine's

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throne. Those who wished to see her slip in it made no secret of their belief that she had shed it—or at least contrived that it should be shed. They did not abandon the belief because Mirovitch was arrested, brought to trial, convicted, and executed. On the contrary, they declared that some other criminal had been compelled to personate Mirovitch on the scaffold, and that he himself had been spirited away and rewarded on condition that he never showed his face again.

It is possible—for everything is possible in Russia. The stories of Russian prisons nearly always end in such clouds of impenetrable doubt. The demeanour of Mirovitch in the dock was admittedly not that of a man who feared his fate; but his fearlessness may just as well have been that of the fanatic as that of the man assured of his escape; and the presumptions against Catherine, in any case, are of the slenderest. She had enemies enough to bring the proofs home to her if there had been any proofs to bring; and she was, in fact, at this time, hardly a free agent, but still in the hands of the men who had given her her throne, and could not see her lose it without risk to themselves.

The accident, however (supposing it to have been an accident), was a lucky one. The security, if not the glory, of Catherine's reign dates from it. We have now to see how she became an autocrat in fact as well as in name.

CHAPTER XII

Catherine signals to Europe—Her Overtures to French Philosophers—Gregory Orlof's Invitation to Jean-Jacques Rousseau

THE clouds of the revolution rolling away, Catherine at last emerges, definite and distinct, individual and recognisable. Poniatowski, indeed, has already revealed her charm, and the Chevalier d'Eon has shown us the fire in her eye; but still one has only partly known her—has known what she did better than why she did it; has had a difficulty in visualising her, and a still greater difficulty in reading her mind; has had to take her, to a large extent, on trust, inferring what she must then have been from our knowledge of what she afterwards became. With her accession our real knowledge begins, and she stands out as a real woman—not the less real because always complex and sometimes inconsistent. She stands at the window which Peter the Great built on the Neva that he might look out on Europe; and one can salute her as—almost—a European.

Peter the Great had climbed out of that window, and climbed back again; but it can

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hardly be said that he was a better European on his return than on his departure. John Evelyn, in whose house he lived at Deptford, complained of his Oriental habits, much as later Occidentals complained of the Oriental habits of the first Shah of Persia who visited London and Paris. He married a loose woman of low birth, and knouted his son to death. It is impossible to think of him except as a barbarian—a barbarian of genius, no doubt, but a barbarian nevertheless; and that, in fact, is how his contemporaries thought of him. Occidental potentates might, for comity's sake, call him their "dear cousin"; but they really regarded him as outside the pale, and classed him with Great Chams and Big Bashaws. Catherine was the first Autocrat of All the Russias whom they could, without too great effort, accept as one of themselves.

She was a good enough Russian in a sense—a much better Russian, in a sense, than Peter III. She worshipped reverentially in Orthodox churches, whereas Peter had often enlivened the hours of divine service by making faces at the officiating clergy. She was patriotic, too, governing the country through Russian and not through foreign Ministers, and rejoicing in the title of Mother of the People. The contrast between her policy and Peter's in that respect was one of the secrets of her strength and popularity; and another may have been her preference for her own subjects in her numerous

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affairs of the heart. But she was a Westerner by birth. The cast of her mind was Occidental, and so was her culture. She had been brought up—or rather she had brought herself up—on Bayle, and Montesquieu, and the Encyclopædists; and when she took her stand at the window which Peter the Great had built, she looked out of it in a different direction from him, and in quest of quite other sights.

Peter the Great had looked chiefly towards England and Holland, interesting himself mainly in the mechanical appliances of progress—the crafts especially of the shipwright and the builder. Catherine looked out towards France, letting it be known that she was interested in fine arts and new ideas. She was also interested in other things, of course—notably in those affairs of the heart about which it will be necessary to say a good deal more before her portrait is complete. On that side of life she was to prove herself somewhat of a Super-woman; but it was not through such excesses that she first challenged attention. No one would have troubled to denounce her as the Messalina of the North if she had not first asserted herself as its Semiramis.

In the reign of Ivan the Terrible, Europe had discovered Russia. In the reign of Peter the Great, Russia had discovered Europe. Now, in the reign of Catherine, and through Catherine, Russia discovered France—and not France merely, but the Liberal France of the Encyclo-

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pædists. How far she had understood the Encyclopædists may be questioned—she was self-educated, and may therefore often have admired without comprehending. But at least she had read their books, and recognised that they had a message for her ; and she now looked to them for further illumination, and sought to get into closer touch with them. She knew them by name ; she could distinguish them one from another ; and the first notable act of her reign was to flash signals to them from the westward window at which she stood—separate signals to Voltaire, to Rousseau, to Diderot, and to d'Alembert.

Diderot was the only one of the four whom she was ever to meet in the flesh. She got him to St. Petersburg at last ; and it is said that he used gleefully to slap her thigh (in mistake for his own) when telling her his good stories. Ten years were to pass, however, before they thus came into physical contact ; and, in the meantime, Catherine made many signals, offered many courtesies, and conferred certain benefits. Hearing that his *Encyclopædia* had been suppressed in Paris, she proposed that its publication should be continued in her own capital. Hearing that he wished to sell his books, in order to provide a dowry for his daughter, she bought them from him, begged him to take care of them for her as long as he lived, made him her librarian, and paid him fifty years' salary in advance—a *beau geste* which could

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not fail to arouse enthusiasm in French intellectual circles.

At about the same time she invited d'Alembert to settle in St. Petersburg as the tutor of the Grand Duke Paul. The choice, in view of the remoteness of Russia from the rest of Europe, showed much the same degree of perspicacity which we should praise in the Shah of Persia if we heard that he had extended a similar invitation to Sir Oliver Lodge; and the terms offered were of truly imperial magnificence—twenty thousand roubles a year, a palace, and the rank of an ambassador. But d'Alembert was not to be tempted. He was not, like Diderot, the sort of man to sit in the boudoir of an Empress, and convulse her with good stories—he preferred the simple life in a Paris flat, with Mlle de Lespinasse; so he made excuses. “So many people are carried off suddenly by colic in that country,” he said, with a shrug of the shoulders, to his friends; while to Catherine herself he protested that though, no doubt, he was competent to teach the Grand Duke a little mathematics, still the heir to the throne of the great Russian nation would need to be trained in such multifarious accomplishments that, really, the responsibility of undertaking his education, etc. etc. . . . It was a polite way of classing Catherine, in spite of her signals, with Great Chams and Big Bashaws; and Catherine perceived that she had been snubbed,

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and was annoyed, albeit without, for that reason, ceasing to signal to the intellectual potentates of the West.

Her signal to Voltaire was chiefly important as a tribute to his pre-eminence as a maker of public opinion—the fact slips out in a letter in which she naïvely tells him that “such acquaintances are very useful.” It suited Catherine, in short, to keep on the blind side of Voltaire, for much the same reasons for which it suits a modern Tsar to keep on the blind side of Mr. W. T. Stead. He blew her trumpet, and presented her point of view; she sent him paragraphs, and he published them. “France persecutes philosophers, but the Scythians support them,” he wrote; and he went into details when, and as, required—putting Catherine right with the French public in the matter of the revolution, praising her for being inoculated with smallpox as a brave example to her subjects, and writing a pamphlet for her in support of the Russian case against the Turks. In return she bought some of the watches manufactured by the philosopher’s dependents at Ferney. He sent her six times as many watches as she had ordered—about £1600 worth in all; and she paid the bill, albeit with the remark that she now had watches enough to last her for a long time.

If Catherine could be surfeited with watches, however, she could not be surfeited with flattery; and Voltaire flattered her to the top of her

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bent. He praised her hands (which he had never seen) as the most beautiful in the world, and declared that her feet (of which he knew as little) were “whiter than the Russian snows.” He also wrote that all philosophers everywhere regarded themselves as her subjects; and he exclaimed in Latin, and in the language of adoration: *Te Catherinam laudamus; te dominam confitemur.* That was what she liked; and she was not to know that he wrote about her to his intimates in a somewhat different tone, saying to Mme du Deffand, for instance—

“I am perfectly aware that people reproach her with certain little matters in regard to her treatment of her husband; but these are family affairs in which I am not concerned. Besides, it is not a bad thing for her to have a fault to make amends for. That gives her a motive for spurring herself to great efforts in the pursuit of public admiration.”

And Catherine did so spur herself; and, just as Voltaire refrained from mixing himself in her family quarrels, so she thought it unnecessary to take any part in his philosophical squabbles. The first exchange of civilities with Voltaire took place at the time of Voltaire’s estrangement from Rousseau; but that did not prevent Catherine from making overtures to him and to Rousseau simultaneously.

Rousseau, at the date of her accession, and

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in the years immediately succeeding it, was being hunted from pillar to post on account of the sentiments set forth in *Emile* and *Le contrat social*. He had fled from France to Switzerland, and from Switzerland to England. Catherine had read his books—there were only three copies of them in the whole of the Russian Empire, but one of them was in her hands ; and the report of his wanderings had reached her. It was an opportunity to flash yet another signal to the intellectual West ; so she told Gregory Orlof to write to Rousseau and invite him to Russia. He obeyed ; and the letter which he sent is a delightful document.

Gregory Orlof was no Western, but a true Scythian, not to say a true Sarmatian ; and he was also as ignorant as it is possible for a Guardsman and a sportsman to be. Probably he heard of Rousseau for the first time when he received his instructions to write to him ; certainly he knew nothing about Rousseau except what Catherine told him. But he sat down at his desk, and wrestled with his instruction bravely ; and with this result—

“ SIR,—You will not be surprised at my writing to you, for you know that every man has his peculiarities. You have yours ; I have mine ; that is only natural, and the motive of this letter is equally so. I see that you have, for a long time, been moving about from one place to another. I know the reasons

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through public channels of information, and perhaps I know them wrongly, for wrong reasons are often given in such cases. I believe you are in England with the Duke of Richmond, and I dare say he is making you comfortable ; but nevertheless I thought I would tell you that I have an estate which is sixty versts (that is, ten German leagues) distant from St. Petersburg, where the air is healthy, and the water good, and where the hill-sides environing a number of lakes lend themselves admirably to meditation. The inhabitants speak neither English nor French ; still less, Greek or Latin. The priest is incapable of arguing, or preaching, and his flock think that they have done their duty when they have made the sign of the cross. Well, sir, if you ever think that this place would suit you, you are welcome to live in it. We would provide you with the necessaries of life, and you would find plenty of shooting and fishing. You can have people to talk to if you like, but there will be no one to worry you, and you will be under no obligations to anyone. All publicity can be avoided if you wish it ; but, in that case, I think you had better travel by sea. Inquisitive people will importune you less if you take that route than if you come by land.”

There is a military directness about that composition from which one infers that Orlof dashed it off without assistance. One pictures

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the writer showing the draft to Catherine, and Catherine finding it a little curt. The concluding paragraph is a shade more polished, and may be supposed to have been added, with fuller instructions and under closer supervision. It runs thus—

“ I have ventured, sir, to address you thus, as a token of the gratitude which I feel for the instruction which I have derived from your works, though it was not for my learning that they were written; and I have the honour to remain, with all expressions of respect,

“ Your obedient humble servant . . .”

Such was the queer communication which reached Jean-Jacques in Derbyshire, where he was roaming on the hills in his voluminous Armenian robes, to the respectful amazement of the rustics, who did not know what to make of him, but inclined to the belief that he was a king kept out of his rights. The text of his reply is graphically illustrative of the difference between the Sarmatian and the European civilisations—

“ You describe yourself, M. le Comte, as eccentric. It is, indeed, almost an eccentricity to exercise disinterested benevolence; and it is quite an eccentricity to do so on behalf of one who is personally unknown to you, and who lives so far away. Your obliging offer,

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the tone in which you make it, and your description of the habitation to which you invite me, would certainly attract me if I were less of an invalid, more active, and younger, and if you lived nearer to the sun. I should be afraid, however, that, when you met the man whom you honour with your invitation, you would be disappointed. You would expect a man of letters—a good talker, who would repay your hospitality with eloquent and witty conversation. You would encounter a very simple person: one whose taste and misfortunes incline him to solitude; whose only recreation is to botanise all day long; and who finds, in the society of the flowers and plants, the peace, so dear to his heart, which human beings have refused to him. Consequently, sir, I shall not come and live in your house; but I shall always remember your invitation to it with gratitude, and I shall often regret my inability to cultivate the friendship of its owner.

“Accept, M. le Comte, my very sincere compliments and my very humble salutations.”

So the matter dropped; and this particular signal was displayed in vain, just as the signal to d'Alembert had been. But the fact that Catherine made it, together with so many other similar signals, as soon as she had conquered her place at Peter the Great's window, and before her position there was quite secure

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against disturbance, is a valuable indication of the kind of woman that she was: a woman, that is to say, of an energetic, not to say a restless, mind—intellectually a daughter of the West, though she had got most of her education in the East—resolved to be “in the movement,” whatever the movement might be, and whether she understood it or not.

Of course, however, the first glimpse which we thus get of her is only partial. To get the full portrait, it will be necessary to follow her when she leaves the window, and observe her conduct of the affairs of her Empire, and also of the affairs of her heart.

CHAPTER XIII

Life at Catherine's Court—Bestuchef's Proposal that she
should marry Gregory Orlof

A SKETCH of Catherine's personal appearance at the time when she was signalling, in the manner described, to the French artists and philosophers, may be taken from *Anecdotes of the Russian Empire in a Series of Letters, written a few years ago from St. Petersburg*, by William Richardson, who was attached to Lord Cathcart's Embassy—

“ The Empress of Russia,” Richardson writes, “ is taller than the middle size, very comely, gracefully formed, but inclined to grow corpulent ; and of a fair complexion which, like every other female in this country, she endeavours to improve by the addition of rouge. She has a fine mouth and teeth ; and blue eyes, expressive of scrutiny, something not so good as observation, and not so bad as suspicion. Her features are in general regular and pleasing. Indeed, with regard to her appearance altogether, it would be doing her injustice to say it was masculine, yet it would not be doing

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her justice to say it was entirely feminine. As Milton intended to say of Eve, that she was fairer than any of her daughters, so this great Sovereign is certainly fairer than any of her subjects whom I have seen. . . . Her demeanour to all around her seemed very smiling and courteous."

From the same gossip we may take a picture of a typical day in the life of the Empress, given to him by "a very respectable old lady of the highest rank"—

"Her Majesty, according to this authority, rises at five in the morning, and is engaged in business till near ten. She then breakfasts and goes to prayers: dines at two: withdraws to her own apartment soon after dinner: drinks tea at five: sees company, plays at cards, or attends public places—the play, opera, or masquerade—till supper: and goes to sleep at ten. By eleven everything about the Palace is as still as midnight. Whist is her favourite game at cards; she usually plays for five imperials (ten guineas) the rubber; and as she plays with great clearness and attention, she is often successful: she sometimes plays, too, at piquet and cribbage. Though she is occasionally present at musical entertainments, she is not said to be fond of music. In the morning, between prayers and dinner, she frequently takes an airing, according as the weather admits, in a coach or sledge. On

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these occasions, she has sometimes no guards, and very few attendants ; and does not choose to be known or saluted as Empress. It is in this manner that she visits any great works that may be going on in the city or in the neighbourhood. She is fond of having small parties of eight or ten persons with her at dinner ; and she frequently sups, goes to balls, or masquerades, in the houses of her nobility. When she retires to her palaces in the country, especially to Tsarskoseloe, she lives with her ladies on a footing of as easy intimacy as possible. Any one of them who rises on her entering or going out of a room is fined in a rouble : and all forfeits of this sort are given to the poor.”

One may add Richardson’s representation of Catherine as the Mother of her People, superintending the proceedings of her Senate. The East and the West—the primitive and the sophisticated—come into clashing contrast in the picture—

“ All the deputies have gold medals, as badges of their office, fastened to their breasts ; and as they come here from the remotest parts of the Empire, the variety of their dresses and appearance is very whimsical and amusing.—I have several times heard the following anecdote of the two Samoyed deputies. I give it you as nearly as possible in the very

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words in which I have heard it. The Empress asked them to suggest such laws as they apprehended would promote the welfare of their nation. One of them replied that they had very few laws, and did not desire any more. ‘How !’ said the Empress. ‘Have you no crimes ? Are there no persons among you guilty of theft, murder, or adultery ? If you have crimes, you must have punishment ; and punishment supposes law.’ ‘We have such crimes,’ answered the deputy, ‘and they are duly punished. If one man puts another to death unjustly, he also must suffer death.’ Here he stopped ; he thought he had said enough. ‘But what,’ resumed Her Majesty, ‘are the punishments of theft and adultery ?’ ‘How !’ said the Samoyed, with a good deal of surprise. ‘Is not detection sufficient punishment ? ’ ”

That is how things appeared to one who was not privileged to see them at very close quarters. If the Semiramis of the North figures in it, the Messalina of the North does not ; and there is even a suggestion in it of Béranger’s King of Yvetot—*se levant tard se couchant tôt* ; and we know, from other sources, that when Catherine rose at this early hour, she lighted her own fire, so as not to give trouble. But of course there was a good deal to be seen that was not visible to Richardson’s eyes. If Messalina, in all her glory, was not yet con-

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spicuous, these, at any rate, were the years in which “favouritism” was being established on a firm basis as a regular Russian institution. The Ambassadors observed that, if Richardson did not. It was one of the things which they were sent to St. Petersburg to observe; and their dispatches, from this time forward, are full of reports concerning Catherine’s preferences for this, that, and the other courtier. Naturally, seeing that the preferences often had, and always might have, a very practical bearing on international politics. In particular, the Ambassadors kept a close eye on Gregory Orlof, and speculated as to whether he would or would not definitely “cut out” Poniatowski.

He did so, but not instantly, and not without a struggle. Poniatowski was a very devout lover; and Catherine’s attachment to him, in the face of political opposition, made her, for a season, a heroine of romance in the eyes of the Russian Court. Evidently she was faithful to him up to a point—and very likely she continued to speak of him as the only man she had ever really loved long after Gregory Orlof had come on the scene and tempted her to “consolatory adventures.” She certainly continued in sentimental correspondence with him long after she had given him a rival, and ridiculed Gregory Orlof’s pretensions long after she had accepted his addresses. Poniatowski, therefore, had grounds

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for hope, even after Catherine's accession, and some reason to expect that he would be summoned to her side.

But Catherine had to choose; and her choice was not quite free. We have seen Gregory Orlof's boast that he and his brothers, holding the Guard in the hollow of their hands, could depose her, if they wished, as easily as they had deposed her husband. To have favoured Poniatowski would have been the one certain way of tempting him to try his strength; and we cannot even be sure that Catherine needed that argument to decide her. The battle for her regard was between a sentimental man and a strong man; and the strong man had risked his life to forward her ambitions. Though she knew his limitations, he must have dazzled and delighted her. One imagines him fascinating her, much as a handsome chorus-girl sometimes fascinates a man of education and refinement. At any rate, though she cherished a tenderness for Poniatowski, and promised to do her best to bring about his election as King of Poland, she also said a sentimental good-bye to him, much in the tone of the girl who promises to be a sister to the man whom, for imperative reasons, it is impossible for her to marry.

"The state of excitement here," she wrote to him, "is terrible. Your arrival here would increase it, so please do not come. . . . A

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regular correspondence with you would be very inconvenient. I have to be very careful of appearances, and I have no time to write love-letters which might cause unfortunate complications. I will do whatever I can for you and your family—you may rest assured of that; but it is necessary for me to be very, very careful.”

So Poniatowski accepted the inevitable, though not without resistance. He pleaded his cause in many letters,—now passionate, now petulant,—being as deeply in love as any man could be; but he consented at last to pass sorrowfully out of Catherine’s life, bribed by the offer of a throne which he did not particularly want; and M. de Breteuil, who, though he was not in Catherine’s confidence, could draw his own conclusions, reported to his Government—

“ I do not know what will be the outcome of the Empress’s correspondence with M. Poniatowski; but I think there is no longer room for doubt that she has given him a successor in the person of M. Orlof, whom she appointed to be a Count on the day of her coronation. He is a very handsome man. He has been in love with the Empress for years; and I well remember the day when she pointed him out to me as an absurd person, and laughed at his ridiculous passion. However, he has earned the right to be treated more seriously. He is a perfect fool,

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people tell me; though, as he speaks no word of any language but Russian, I have some difficulty in judging for myself."

And then, in a subsequent dispatch—

"A few days ago they produced a Russian tragedy at the Court, and this favourite (Orlof) played the principal part very awkwardly. The Empress, however, was so charmed with the graces of the actor that she sent for me several times to talk about him and ask me what I thought of him. With the Comte de Mercy (the Austrian Ambassador) she did not even stop at that. He was sitting next to her; and she drew his attention enthusiastically, again and again, to Orlof's good looks and aristocratic bearing."

There clearly were no doubts lingering in M. de Breteuil's mind when he wrote that second letter; and there were no grounds for any. Gregory Orlof had definitely conquered. Catherine's feelings for him had passed through three stages. She had begun by laughing at him. She had proceeded to apologise for him. "I know," she said to M. de Breteuil, "that these people are quite uneducated, but I owe my position to them. They have both honesty and courage, and I am confident that they will not betray me." Now she let her fascination be seen, and called upon all the world to be fascinated with her.

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Nor was that all. Encouraged by her old friend Bestuchef, she even entertained for a while the idea of marrying Gregory Orlof.

Bestuchef, it will be remembered, had been sent to his estates in connection with a plot in which Catherine herself might have been implicated if the compromising papers had not been burnt in time. Peter did not recall him; but Catherine, of course, lost no time in doing so. She gave him a liberal pension, and a seat in the Senate; but, for whatever reason, she did not restore him to his old supreme place in the councils of the nation. He was growing old. The new men had stronger claims, and it may be that she had never quite forgiven him for his rude treatment of her in the days when she was a mere girl, not worth conciliating. It may be, too, that she thought him less trustworthy, or less competent, than Panin. Whatever the explanation, he was dissatisfied, and, conceiving that he might find Gregory Orlof more amenable than Catherine, he buttonholed him, and whispered in his ear—

“ Gregory Gregorovitch, it is to no purpose that Catherine has given you her heart unless she presents you with her hand. . . . She cannot worthily reward you but by giving you a share in that throne which she owes to your prowess. Indeed, why should she refuse it? Who is better able than you to support that throne against all attempts of conspirators to

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overthrow it ? Who would be more agreeable to the sovereign ? . . .

“ I am sensible, however, that it might not be proper for you to make the proposal. Obstacles might probably be thrown in your way with which your delicacy would forbid you to contend. A refusal might occasion you a mutual perplexity. Trust yourself to my long experience and my friendship. I shall contrive to determine the Empress herself to offer you her crown.”

Or words to that effect—for, of course, there were no reporters present to take down the words actually used ; and one can understand how Gregory Orlof was impressed by such advice from such a quarter. Intellectually, he was not brilliant ; but he was brave as a lion and vain as a peacock. Distinguished by the Empress, and flattered by the most experienced of her councillors, he was easily persuaded that he need set no bounds to his ambition, but would adorn a throne. At the same time, he knew that he was a parvenu who must walk warily, because his progress was sure to be watched by many jealous eyes. A subaltern of the Guards, with the manners not of a subaltern but of a sergeant-major, can easily make enemies among officers of higher rank and nobler birth by the mere act of succeeding too well in life. So he was the very man to be exploited by a cunning statesman, and to consent to lie low

BESTUCHEF'S PLAN

and say nothing—not trusting himself to say anything to the point—while the statesman worked out a plan for his advancement.

And Bestuchef had already formed his plan. He had formed two plans, in fact ; and he proceeded to set the machinery in motion for their accomplishment. Associated with him in his scheme was Vorontsof, the uncle of Princess Dashkof, and Grand Chancellor of the Empire.

CHAPTER XIV

The Search for Precedents—The Failure to find any—Objections of the Senate—Gregory Orlof established in the Post of Favourite

THE first plan was to find, and proclaim, a precedent.

In the case of an Emperor there would, of course, have been no difficulty. Russian history bristled with precedents for the union of a Russian Emperor with the humblest and least reputable of his subjects. The precedent of Michael, already mentioned, who summoned the daughters of the nobility to his Palace, bidding them bring their night-gowns, in order that, after careful review of their charms, the most charming of them might be chosen as his bride, would have sufficed. So would the precedent of Peter the Great marrying the kept mistress of one of his generals. The precedents, in short, were so numerous and well known that it would not have been worth while to cite them. But the case of an Empress was different. Jealousies of more moment were there involved; and there was only one precedent — and that a doubtful one — avail-

THE SEARCH FOR PRECEDENTS

able : the Empress Elizabeth's supposed secret marriage with Razumofski—the precentor of the imperial chapel.

It was not quite certain that she had married him. He was a discreet man, not given to boasting, who now lived in retirement, and spent his time in reading the Bible. The proofs of the marriage (supposing that there had been a marriage) were, however, believed to be in his hands. The question was whether (supposing them to exist) they could be got from him; whether he could be induced to revive the memory of an old romance, and admit that his imperial mistress had made an honest man of him. Vorontsof undertook to try. He called on Razumofski, whom he found sitting by the stove reading the Bible, and told him what he wanted, and why he wanted it. He showed him the decree which he had prepared, publicly recognising him as the husband of the late Empress, and raising him to the rank of Imperial Highness.

Razumofski took the decree from him, and read it carefully. Then he rose, crossed the room, and opened the door of an old oak cabinet, from which he took a casket of ebony and silver. He unlocked the casket, and withdrew a roll of parchment tied up with a faded pink ribbon. He untied the ribbon, and proceeded to examine the parchment. All this without speaking a word ; while Vorontsof sat facing him, believing that he had gained his end.

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But he had not. When he had carefully run his eye over all the sheets, Razumofski rolled them up again—but he did not hand the roll to Vorontsof. On the contrary, he first pressed it to his lips, while the tears glistened in his hollow eyes and ran down his withered cheeks, and then, still without speaking, he once more crossed the room to the corner where a lamp was burning before a sacred icon. Then, with his eyes steadily fixed upon Vorontsof, he thrust the roll of parchment into the flame, and held it there until it was consumed to ashes. Something in his look forbade Vorontsof to interfere; and when the work of destruction was done, Razumofski sank, with a sigh of relief, into a deep chair, and spoke—

“ I have never been anything but the most humble slave of Her Majesty the Empress Elizabeth. I ask only to be the humble servant of her present Majesty. Pray beg her to continue the manifestations of her goodwill towards me.”

So the first plan failed. The proofs having perished, the precedent could not be cited; and Bestuchef was thrown back upon his second plan—the organisation of a petition from the Russian people to the Empress to call one of her subjects to the throne as her consort. He succeeded in getting a certain number of signatures—some bishops and some general officers

PROPOSAL OF MARRIAGE

were among those who signed ; but the signatories were not the only persons who had a voice in the matter. The cry arose on all sides that this sort of thing would never do.

Gregory Orlof's fellow-conspirator, Hetrof, voiced the discontent for one, declaring, according to Princess Dashkof, that "he would be the first to plunge his sword into the heart of Gregory Orlof, though certain that his own death would be the consequence, rather than submit to the humiliation of acknowledging him for his sovereign, and of witnessing his country's disgrace, as the only result of their late patriotic exertions." Panin, as sagacious as he was obese, was equally firm, though less dramatic. A Grand Duchess, he said, might please herself in the bestowal of her hand, but—"a Madame Orlof can never be Empress of Russia" ; and when the project was brought forward for discussion in the Senate, one of the more aged of the senators did not scruple to speak his mind plainly to Catherine's face—

" Since I see that none of my colleagues is willing to say what he thinks, then I will do so. Your Majesty will permit me to remark that, while we are delighted to see our sovereigns select subjects on whom to confer their favours and affections, we can never consent that men who are socially no more than our equals should presume to become our masters."

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Whether that utterance, or Hetrof's threat, or Panin's more diplomatically expressed objection was the decisive factor does not matter. Between them, they produced their effect, and compelled Catherine to realise that there were lengths to which she must not go. It is doubtful, indeed, whether she had ever keenly desired to promote her lover to the rank of partner of her throne ; and when she found the agitation so intense that it was necessary to post sentries at Orlof's door for his protection—and when there were stories of attempts to lure the sentries from their post, in order that the conspirators might be enabled to murder Orlof in his sleep—she abandoned the design, affecting never to have entertained it.

But she did not abandon it in Poniatowski's favour, though it was reported in Paris that she had done so, or would do so.

The rumour ran there that Catherine was likely to abdicate in favour of the Grand Duke Paul, and join Poniatowski in Poland. Mme Geoffrin, whom Poniatowski had met in Paris, and who corresponded with him as a mother with her son, repeated the report to him, but without believing it ; and he knew very well that there was no foundation for it.

“ It is six years,” he wrote, “ since I last saw the Empress, and I have little hope of ever seeing her again. It is a very cruel deprivation for me ; but I must make the best of

SORROWS OF PONIATOWSKI

it—just as I have to make the best of so many things.”

Six years since he had seen her ; and he still loved her, and could love no one else ! “ Her reputation,” he wrote, “ is still dear to me.” He defended it, insisting that she could not conceivably have had any hand in the imbecile Ivan’s tragic death, expressing the wish that she had wiser counsellors, and recalling the time when she had admitted to him that advice was necessary for her guidance—

“ She used to acknowledge it. I remember her saying, ‘ I feel the power over me of the man whom I love. May God preserve you for me—I shall be the better woman.’ I heard her say those words, and they were true. If we could have a talk together, I could tell you things which would convince you of it. . . . I would rather that she only put herself in the wrong with me, and not with the public.”

Whereto Mme Geoffrin could only reply that if Catherine had indeed said such things, no doubt she had meant them at the time, but that it was to be feared that she had since expressed similar sentiments to other men ; and Poniatowski had to make what he could of that. For a moment he turned to Mme Geoffrin herself for consolation, and offered his heart to her ; but she did not forget that she was old

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enough to be his mother, and contented herself with laughing at him, and giving him good advice—

“ My dear boy, it is a fine present which you offer me : the heart returned to you from over the border. Anyone can see—I smile as I write it—that you are very hungry for love. Very well. Fall in love with me, if you want to ; but don’t fall in love—not deeply in love, at all events—with anybody else. Love is a dangerous emotion for a king. You must amuse yourself, of course ; but don’t let your heart get seriously entangled.”

So the subject dropped, and Poniatowski continued to love Catherine in vain, and from a distance. He still loved her, as we shall see, years afterwards, in spite of her willingness to sacrifice him to political exigencies and deprive him of the throne and sceptre which she had bestowed ; his throne being nothing to him, and Catherine everything. His enduring tenderness is a thing to be remembered, and the expressions of it must be set beside the colder characterisations of the *corps diplomatique* in any attempt to form a complete picture of her personality. They show us something more than the glittering sovereign who passed through history like the central figure of a magnificent procession ; something more, too, than the alleged Messalina of the North—a woman who

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boasted her two soul-sides, like the rest of us. It was because of the second soul-side that the tenderness of this *âme sensible* stood the strain she put on it. One wonders what would have happened if Poniatowski had had the nerve to disobey her, and come to her. . . .

But he did not dare ; and therefore one concludes that, if he had dared, he would have dared in vain. He was a Man of Sentiment, engaged in unequal conflict with a Man of Gallantry ; a Man of Charm, against whom a Strong Man had pitted himself. The Strong Man prevailed, as Strong Men are apt to do. He did not prevail altogether, as we have seen. He could not persuade Russia that he would be an acceptable Russian Emperor. He failed even, at that time, to secure the dignity of a Prince of the Holy Roman Empire ;¹ for even Catherine felt that the line must be drawn somewhere, and that there were some honours of which Guardsmen with the rough manners of sergeant-majors were unworthy—a prejudice which we may perhaps attribute to her German origin and her German ideas about caste. But other honours—and innumerable offices—were showered upon him. He was offered the command of the Engineers, the Horse Guards, and the Artillery ; he was placed in charge of the Colonisation and Fortification Departments. A marble palace was built for him, bearing over its porch the significant inscription : “ Constructed as a

¹ He got the coveted honour at a later date.

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proof of grateful friendship"; and both the English and the French Ambassadors made remarks—

"The more closely I observe M. Orlof," wrote Bérenger, "the more certain I feel that he is Emperor in all but the name. His free-and-easy manners with the Empress impress every one—the Russians say that nothing of the kind has been known in their country since the foundation of the monarchy. Trampling all etiquette underfoot, he publicly takes such liberties with his sovereign as no mistress in polite society would tolerate from her lover."

Nor did Catherine—as yet, at all events—show signs of resenting those liberties. On the contrary, she continued, as she had begun, to bestow her bounties on her favourite on a scale of barbaric splendour. He had nothing to pay for board and lodging, and his pocket money amounted to 10,000 roubles (£2000) a month. From beginning to end, he and his brothers between them are computed to have drawn about 17,000,000 roubles (£3,400,000) from the public purse; and Gregory, beyond a doubt, got a good deal more than his just fifth share of that large total. He was also assigned estates of the size of provinces, and whole armies of serfs, to work on them without payment, and so make them profitable. A more personal distinction was the permission to

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wear in his buttonhole the miniature portrait of his mistress and sovereign set in diamonds.

It did not matter in Russia quite as it would have mattered elsewhere—the ambassadorial reporters insist strongly upon that. Russia, they point out, was accustomed to that sort of thing—the Empress Anne had loved a groom well enough to make him Duke of Courland; so that precedents could be found for the appearance of a Russian Empress in the rôle of King Cophetua. Still, there were murmurs. The ancient Russian nobility—such as they were—did not like the idea of kicking their heels in the antechamber of one who had so recently been a subaltern of no importance—one who, according to Frederick the Great's Ambassador, “had, in his time, sat down to dinner with lackeys and artisans.” Count Cheremeief, the Court Chamberlain, did not see why he should be called upon to escort the carriage in which the ex-subaltern was privileged to sit by the Empress’s side. If Gregory Orlof had tried to push himself to the front politically as well as socially, there would, beyond question, have been trouble.

But that, in spite of Catherine’s solicitations, he did not care to do, knowing his limitations, and feeling more comfortable when he kept within them. One is reminded by him of a somewhat common type: the athlete who gives up athletics, spreads abroad, and lets his muscles grow flabby, content to bask in the

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memory of the redoubtable achievements of his youth. In vain did Catherine place him at the head of various Commissions and Committees, and appoint him to preside over the deliberations of the Senate. He accepted the appointments—and, of course, the emoluments—but he consistently neglected all the duties attached to them.

His one notable appearance in the Senate was for the purpose of opposing the election of Poniatowski to the throne of Poland. It is said that he rose in his place and swore at Poniatowski, like the trooper that he was; but that intervention was due, of course, to jealousy, and not to considerations of state-craft. Poniatowski had been his rival; and magnanimity towards rivals—especially rivals to whom Catherine had shown a soul-side which he himself could not even have seen if it had been shown to him—was not one of Gregory Orloff's virtues. He seems to have been assured, however,—and to have accepted the assurance,—that there was nothing to be jealous about. He withdrew his objections, and apologised. That done, he neglected public affairs, and devoted himself to the chase. He pursued the bear—and he pursued the maids-of-honour. “All the maids-of-honour are at his beck and call,” writes another French diplomatist, Sabatier de Cabres.

Sabatier does not write as a friend either of Catherine or of the Russian people. He sums

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up the latter in very scornful terms. They are for him barbarous babies playing at being grown-up people—savages covered with a varnish of culture and civilisation which only serves to make them more ridiculous when it cracks and shows the ugly stuff beneath. Catherine, similarly, is an overrated ruler who has pursued the bubble reputation by the device of pensioning men of letters—

“ Hence her renown for creative genius, all the talents, firmness of character, profound insight, sublime policy, and all that goes to make a great sovereign! But I dispute that verdict, and maintain that it would be difficult to have a sovereign more grossly deceived as to the true interests of the country, or less inclined to follow up the attempts made by her predecessors to consolidate the half-baked material of which it is composed.”

An unkind response that to the friendly signals flashed from the window which looked out upon intellectual Europe. But Sabatier, though severe, shows anxiety to be just; and it is notable that while the Semiramis of the North is no Semiramis for him, he is careful to guard himself against writing her down as a Messalina—

“ Calumny,” he writes, “ has not spared her moral character; but it must be allowed

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that, while not altogether above reproach, she is very far from the excesses of which she has been accused. Several intrigues prior to the one which now absorbs her have been attributed to her with some show of plausibility. People even whisper under their breath that she has permitted herself certain distractions ; but there really is no proof of anything except her three known liaisons with M. Soltikof, the King of Poland, and Count Gregory Orlof. Her passion for the last named is of an unparalleled description, and can only be explained by taking account of the tenacity of her ideas. At first she loved him to the point of idolatry ; then she ran up against the hatred which her favourite inspired, and he gained a position in her obstinate mind which long habit must have caused him to lose in her heart. I am convinced that her love for him is much less than it was, but that, without having declined into mere friendship, it has given place to the calm, secure attachment which comes with age, after the failure of the resources of youth. She is well aware of his frequent infidelities—which, indeed, he is at small pains to conceal from her. All the maids-of-honour are at his beck and call. She knows it, and has demanded explanations in terms outspoken to the point of indecorum. He runs after every woman who attracts him, pays her very little attention, and stands on no ceremony with her ; and yet, in spite of all that, I doubt whether any man

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enjoys such a position as his at any of the Courts of Europe."

That was written in 1772, when Catherine was forty-three, and had been ten years on the throne. It shows us very clearly that the special reputation attached to Catherine's name was not earned by her in her youth, or in a day. It was, in her case, what Balzac calls "the terrible love of the woman of forty" (and fifty, and even sixty), which excited remark alike by its violence and by its variability. Until that date Catherine does not seem to have gone a great deal further than her predecessors, the Empresses Elizabeth and Anne. She had her Empire to attend to, and she attended to it in person, feeling only a moderate need of those "distractions" of which we have heard the Ambassador speak. It will be proper to turn aside for a moment, and watch her attending to it, before pursuing the story of Orlof's hard, but unsuccessful, fight for the first place in her affections—a fight which had, in fact, already begun at the time when Sabatier de Cabres declared that his unique position in her regard seemed to him irrefragably established.

CHAPTER XV

Catherine's Foreign Policy—The kidnapping of Princess Tarakanof

SPACE forbids any elaborate analysis of Catherine's foreign policy ; but its broad outlines may be indicated. In all likelihood it was in reality determined by circumstances, even when it appeared to be determined by caprices and whims ; but one does not search in vain for a feminine note in its inconsistencies.

Catherine began by disclaiming territorial ambitions. "I have already people enough to make happy," she said, when there was a proposal to incorporate Courland in her Empire. "This little strip of territory would add nothing to my felicity." Having said that, she proceeded to bear a hand in the partition of Poland, and to wrest the Crimea and other provinces from the Turks ; and her ultimate boast that, though she had come to Russia without a dowry, she had left her subjects the Crimea and Poland as legacy is well known and often quoted.

Catherine, again, began by issuing a manifesto in which she denounced Frederick the Great as her "mortal enemy," but changed

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her mind and opened her arms to him when, going through her husband's papers, she discovered a letter in which he paid her fulsome compliments. From that time onwards, she acted in conjunction with him, if not actually as an instrument in his hands, with England, more or less, as a third partner to the *entente*, and France and Austria for her opponents. She was not, indeed, a Francophobe of the school of Peter, who carried Francophobia to the point of serving a company of French comedians with notice to quit St. Petersburg. On the contrary, as we have seen, she looked to intellectual and artistic France for sympathy and inspiration. But intellectual France was the France of the Opposition. The relations with official France were strained until a date with which we need not yet concern ourselves. They certainly were not friendly at the date at which Sabatier de Cabres depreciated her intelligence ; and meanwhile there had been interference with Poland and war with Turkey.

The condition of things which made interference in Poland possible, and almost natural, may be illustrated by an anecdote preserved in J. B. Scherer's entertaining volume of Russian miscellanies—

“ There was, at the Court of Elizabeth, a Pole named Novitski, remarkable as a performer on the mandolin. On the death of the King of Poland, he asked permission to depart ; and

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he was asked why he wished to go. ‘I am a Polish nobleman,’ he said. ‘I hope, as any Polish nobleman may, to be elected to the throne.’ ‘And if, as seems possible, the choice of the electors does not fall on you, what do you propose to do then?’ ‘In that case,’ he replied, ‘I hope to be permitted to return to St. Petersburg and resume my duties as a mandolinist.’”

In a country in which even a wandering mandolinist could cherish such ambitions, anything might happen. What happened in this case was the imposition of Poniatowski through Russian influence to serve Russian interests. It is impossible to say whether he was a more or a less desirable candidate than the mandolinist, for the mandolinist was a dark horse, and did not win. He was the irresistible candidate because he had Catherine at his back. There were advisers who represented to her that his qualifications were not very obvious, seeing that he was only the grandson of an estate agent in a small way of business; but she would not listen to their objections. “Even if he were an estate agent himself,” she said, “I would still have him crowned;” and her insistence may be judged from an intercepted dispatch to her Ambassador at Warsaw—

“ My dear Count, be sure you look after my candidate. I am writing this to you at two

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o'clock in the morning, so you may judge whether I am indifferent in the matter."

And the candidate was duly elected, under the pressure of Russian bayonets—a pressure so vigorous that Russian officers actually sat in the gallery of the Polish Chamber, and, leaning down from it, prodded the Member for Cracow, because his patriotic oratory displeased them. Then, after an interval, but nevertheless as a consequence, followed the first Turkish war.

Russia was not in the least ready for war. Graphic stories are told in the dispatches of Sabatier de Cabres and others of skeleton regiments, inadequate commissariat, and artillery hurried to the front in post carts and sticking in the mud by the way. But luck and energy prevailed. A competent general was found in Rumantsof, who routed an Ottoman army more than four times as large as his own. Fresh territory was added to the Empire; and the Russian fleet made its first appearance in Mediterranean waters, under the command of Admiral Spiridof, who was placed, in his turn, under the direction and supervision of Alexis Orlof.

Those naval operations are not without an element of farcical comedy. Catherine reviewed the fleet before it started, and complained, in a confidential letter to Panin, that she had seen it fire all day at a target without once hitting it, and that it manœuvred more like a fleet of

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herring-boats than a naval squadron. It took five months to sail from Cronstadt to Minorca ; and of the fifteen vessels which set out only eight reached their destination—a progress which affords an interesting precedent for a more recent Russian naval exploit. It is no wonder that Catherine dismissed Spiridof and applied to England for an Admiral to take his place. She was given Elphinston, who destroyed the Turkish fleet with fire-ships in the muddy Bay of Tchesmé ; but the only achievement of the expedition for which a Russian could take the undivided credit was the kidnapping of the so-called Princess Tarakanof.

That story is another of the many Russian historical mysteries. It may not be altogether possible, in relating it, to separate legend from fact, but one may begin with the version of the transaction set forth in Wraxall's *Historical Memoirs*. He heard it, in 1799, at a dinner-party in Berkeley Square, from Sir John Dick, who had been British Consul at Leghorn at the time—

“ During the time,” said Sir John, “ that the Russian Squadron lay in the harbour of Leghorn, in 1771, Alexis Orlof, who was the Admiral, resided frequently, if not principally, at Pisa, where he hired a splendid house. One morning, about eleven o'clock, a Cossack, who was in his service and who acted as his courier, arrived at my door, charged with a message to inform me

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that his master, with some company, in three carriages meant to dine with me on that day. I accordingly ordered a dinner to be prepared for his reception. When he arrived, he brought with him a lady, whom he introduced to my wife and to myself; but he never named her, only calling her *Questa dama*. She was by no means handsome, though genteel in her figure, apparently thirty years of age, and had the air of a person who had suffered in her health. There seemed something mysterious about her, which excited my curiosity, but which I could not penetrate. Considering her with attention, it struck me forcibly that I had seen her before, and in England. Being determined if possible to satisfy myself on this point, as we stood leaning against the chimney-piece in my drawing-room before dinner, I said to her, 'I believe, ma'am, you speak English.' 'I speak only one little,' answered she. We sat down to dinner, and after the repast, Alexis Orlof proposed to my wife and to another lady who was there present to accompany him and the female stranger on board his ship. They both declining it, Orlof took her with him in the evening. . . .

"On the ensuing morning, when Orlof came on shore, he proceeded to my house. His eyes were violently inflamed, and his whole countenance betrayed much agitation. Without explaining to me the cause or the reason of this disorder, he owned that he had passed a very unpleasant night; and he requested me to let

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him have some of the most amusing books in my library, in order to divert the lady who was on board his ship. I never saw her again ; but I know that, soon afterwards, she was sent by Alexis in a frigate to Cronstadt, where, without being ever landed, she was transferred up the Neva to the fortress of Schlüsselburg, at the mouth of the Lake Ladoga. Catherine there confined her in the very room that Peter III. had caused to be constructed with intent to shut up herself in it. The lady unquestionably died in that prison of chagrin.”

So far Sir John. His narrative is, to some extent, that of a man placed on his defence—suspected, if not actually accused, of having assisted Alexis Orlof to kidnap a helpless woman. Wraxall listened to it with a scepticism which he is at no pains to conceal ; and there are, of course, striking additions to it from other hands, purporting to solve the riddle of Princess Tarakanof’s identity, and to unfold the drama of her fate.

The so-called Princess, according to the current gossip, was in reality the daughter born of the secret marriage of the Empress Elizabeth to Razumofski. She had in her possession, it was declared, a will in which the Empress Elizabeth named her as her successor, was plotting to claim the throne, and had been promised the support of the Turkish army, and also of a considerable party of Polish mal-

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contents—hence the necessity of capturing her, by fair means or foul, and taking her to Russia. Her death was due to a rising of the Neva, which flooded the dungeon in which she was confined at Schlüsselburg, and drowned her. A subject picture of her last agony, by the Russian painter Flavintski, was exhibited in St. Petersburg in 1864 and in Paris in 1867—attracting so much indignant attention that the Russian Government, even at that distance of time, thought it well to search the archives and set forth an official version of the incident.

It set forth, among other things, that Schlüsselburg was not the prison in which Princess Tarakanof was incarcerated, and that the flood in which she was alleged to have perished did not occur until two years after her death. The statement, of course, can no more be checked than can the official accounts of any of the other tragedies of the Russian prisons; but there is a considerable literature of the subject, by no means all of it official, and the career of the unfortunate woman can be traced, if not completely, at least sufficiently to make a connected story.

She was not a daughter of Elizabeth, or a princess of any sort or kind—Sir John Dick was absolutely right about that. She was an adventuress—neither more nor less; an adventuress whose face was her fortune. Whether she was the daughter of a baker of Franconia or of an innkeeper of Prague is uncertain,

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and does not matter. It is said that she was brought up at Kiel until she was nine, and was then taken to the East, and lived first at Bagdad, and afterwards at Ispahan. It is also said that a Persian prince became her protector, took her to London (where Sir John Dick supposed that he had seen her), and there deserted her, and that she found her way thence to Paris in 1772. Be that as it may, it is in Paris that we first get definite and undeniable information about her.

We find her there, in 1772, calling herself Princess Ali Emettée de Vlodomir, and giving out that she was the niece of a wealthy Persian notable. She was very beautiful, and lived richly, with two elderly barons, apparently of German nationality, one of whom was understood to be a relative. Many admirers were in attendance, including Prince Michael Oginski of Poland. Her relations with Poles were to be her undoing, and that seems to have been the beginning of them. Before very long, however, her establishment at Paris had to be broken up, because the Baron von Embs, who passed as her relative, was unable to pay his bills. It transpired that the Baron von Embs was not a baron at all, but the prodigal son of a Ghent merchant. He disappeared, and Princess Ali Emettée de Vlodomir disappeared also, albeit in a different direction. She too, it seems, had creditors, and was not in a position to give them their dues.

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At this point there is a gap in her career, which cannot be filled up ; but after the lapse of a few months we rediscover her at Frankfort. She had changed her name, and was now a Princess of Azof, heir to the throne of a principality under the protection of Russia. Any-one who had troubled to search the *Almanach de Gotha*, which had then been just four years in existence, would have discovered that there was no such principality and no such princess ; but the *Almanach de Gotha* was not yet recognised as the final court of appeal in these matters, and the story of the adventuress was believed. She flourished in the best of the Frankfort inns until the Duke of Limburg, fascinated by her charms, installed her in his castle at Oberstein, and even proposed to marry her.

So far so good. The adventuress was within an ace of becoming an honest woman, and living happily ever afterwards. Unfortunately, however, she was too expensive for her protector, as fascinating adventuresses are somewhat apt to be ; and when relations became strained on that account, she turned her beautiful eyes in the direction of Prince Radzivil, who was then living at Mannheim.

He was a wealthy and hot-headed Pole, opposed to Russian interference in Polish affairs. His estates had been confiscated, but he had got away with a good deal of portable property. It was believed that he carried about with him twelve life-size statues of the Twelve Apostles—

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all of solid gold—and paid his way by chipping pieces off them as required. However that may have been, he was rich enough for the practical purposes of the adventuress ; and she won his favour by whispering in his ear the mysterious story of her relationship to the Empress Elizabeth—adding that she had been brought up in a convent, banished to Siberia, released by sympathetic gaolers, and escorted over the frontier to Persia.

We need not jump to the conclusion that Radzivil believed that story ; but, whether he believed it or not, he saw a means of exploiting it to his advantage. He had already contemplated joining the Turkish army—he would be a doubly welcome recruit if he brought with him a pretender to the Russian throne, in whose name a Russian insurrection might be contrived. He took her away, therefore, from her affianced husband, and conducted her first to Venice, and then to Ragusa, *en route* for Constantinople. It was while she was at Ragusa, where the French Consul ceded his house to her, that Alexis Orlof, who was at Leghorn, heard of her proceedings. It is said that she wrote to him, believing him to be a man with a grievance, and likely to take her side ; but, if that was her belief, it was a mistaken one. Alexis wrote home for orders ; and the instructions sent to him were that he must bring the pretender, who was now styling herself Princess Tarakanof, to Russia

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at any cost, even if Ragusa had to be bombarded in order to secure her.

Before the instructions arrived, the Princess had left Ragusa, and had once more changed her name. She now called herself Countess Pimberg, procuring money by selling spurious decorations and titles, yet not raising enough of it to satisfy her needs. The Russo-Turkish war having come to an unexpected end, Radzivil had no further use for her ; but she made the acquaintance of Sir William Hamilton, and tried to borrow from him. Sir William recommended her to Dick, whom we have already met, and who was a banker as well as a Consul ; and Dick gave information to Orlof.

It was arranged that Alexis should meet her at Dick's house. He not only met her there, but made love to her, and proposed to marry her and organise a revolution which should place them jointly on the throne. She fell in with his views, and a mock marriage, believed by her to be a real one, was performed. Then, of course, Alexis proposed to take his bride on board his ship, telling her that he had arranged a sham naval battle for her diversion. He had also arranged that the guns should fire a salute to her, and that the sailors should receive her with shouts of "*Vive l'impératrice !*" But that was the end of her illusions. When she descended to the cabin, it was explained to her that she was no wife, but a prisoner, and that her ultimate fate would be settled after

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the St. Petersburg police had inquired into the rights of her case.

That is the Russian account of her capture ; and the Russian account of her end is that she was found to be in an advanced stage of pulmonary consumption, and died in prison on 4th December 1775. Perhaps it is true. It is a shade more credible that Princess Tarakanof died of consumption than that Peter III. died of colic. The one story, however, aroused almost as widespread a scepticism as the other ; and the scepticism, this time, was attended with an indignation which drove Alexis Orlof out of Italy in fear for his life.

Catherine wrote to him to say that she thoroughly approved of his conduct in every particular. Whether he had acquainted her with all the particulars—with those of the mock marriage, for example—one may take leave to doubt. His rôle in her reign—in the first half of it, at all events—is that of the man who did the dirty work ; and he may very well have preferred to do it in his own way, content to be judged by results. That, too, may very well have been the line of the officer who is said to have starved the adventuress in prison in order to induce her to confess her guilt. Catherine, after all, was chiefly concerned with results, and seldom showed suspicion of her instruments. The throne which she had ascended through violence was still unstable ; and she had a good deal to think

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about besides those affairs of the heart which are commonly supposed to have monopolised her attention. It will be worth while to give an account of some other troubles and interests which occupied her before reverting to the story of the fall of Gregory Orlof and the rise of his rapid series of successors.

CHAPTER XVI

The Visit of Diderot—The Insurrection of Pugachef

ONE of Catherine's distractions at the time under consideration was the visit of Diderot—the most ready of all the philosophers to respond to the signals which we have seen her flashing to the intellectual world. The visit was not altogether a success either from his point of view or hers, but it presents features of lively interest.

Diderot had not the polished cynicism of d'Alembert, who concealed his fear of colic beneath the plea of incapacity for the employment proposed to him ; nor had he the discretion of Voltaire, who avoided disillusion by contenting himself with flattering the Empress from a distance. He had the simple mind of a child who believes that, if things are not what they seem, then they must be better than they seem. He had an enthusiasm which was ready to boil over as milk does, and a disposition to make himself generally useful. So when Catherine sent him 50,000 francs, he decided to drive to St. Petersburg to thank her for the gift.

Very possibly a “lively sense of favours to

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come" was one of the elements of his gratitude—that, in fact, will appear as we proceed. But it was by no means the only element. Catherine had really made an impression on Diderot, and he took her as seriously as he took philosophy itself. He had rendered her some really useful services by collecting works of art for her galleries. He had tried, though unsuccessfully, to render her a still greater service by buying the manuscript of Rulhière's piquant account of her revolution which was being read aloud at fashionable gatherings in Paris. He was not one of those who gossiped about her family affairs or wanted to know what she had done with her husband, but was quite willing to believe that whatever had happened could be satisfactorily explained. For him, in short, Catherine was, in very truth, the Semiramis of the North—just that and nothing else; and he was persuaded that she was as anxious to listen as he was to talk—as eager to learn as he was to teach. He set out to her, therefore, as the self-accredited Ambassador of Philosophy, expecting to be asked to complete Catherine's education and show her how to govern her dominions.

His friends were full of apprehension. Diderot, they remembered, was the son of a cutler, and was not used to Courts. Therefore, they argued, he would commit *gaucheries*, and would be shown the door. Things were not, in fact, quite so bad as that; but they tended a

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little in that direction. Diderot was an unconventional philosopher, and Catherine was an unconventional sovereign; but their unconventionalities did not dovetail.

The trouble began because Catherine had forgotten that Diderot was coming, and had provided no lodging for him, so that he had to throw himself on the hospitality of his friend Narishkin. The trouble was accentuated when he turned up at the palace in a rusty suit of black, with the result that Catherine sent him a gaudy ready-made costume, in order that he might be relatively presentable. The trouble was not altogether assuaged by his deportment when received in audience. He had no intention of being rude, but he was naturally incapable of respect for ranks and persons. Consequently, when he got excited, and the Empress did not agree with everything he said, he addressed her as "my good woman," and shook her by the arm, and banged the table. Moreover, it is in one of her own letters that we read that she caused that table to be placed between herself and the philosopher because of his incorrigible habit of emphasising his points by slapping her on the thigh.

The most unsatisfactory thing of all, however, from Diderot's own point of view, was that, though he talked and talked,—he was sometimes allowed to talk for three hours without interruption,—he made no progress. He had come as an instructor, and was received as an object

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of curiosity. He presented memorandum after memorandum, advising the Empress on all departments of her policy ; and none of the advice was taken. The Empress said that he seemed to her to combine the wisdom of an old man with the ignorance and inexperience of a child; and at last she snubbed him, saying—

“ Monsieur Diderot, I have listened with the most intense pleasure to the inspirations of your brilliant intellect ; but the application of these noble principles, which I assure you I quite understand, though it would do beautifully in books, would work out very badly in practice. . . . You only work on paper, which puts up with anything, and presents no obstacles to your imagination or to your pen. I, a poor Empress, have to work with human nature for my material ; and that is a much more ticklish business.”

“ And, after that,” said Catherine, when she told the story to the Comte de Ségur and the Prince de Ligne, “ we confined our conversations to questions of literature and morality.”

The reports of those conversations, however, have not been preserved ; and it only remains to relate that Diderot decided to return to France. The waters of the Neva, which still have an evil reputation in spite of the fact that they have been blessed regularly for hundreds of years, disturbed his digestive functions. He suffered from colic, though not from that fatal

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kind of colic which d'Alembert had feared ; and he was also conscious that Russian functionaries were jealous of him, and suspicious of his revolutionary ideas. So he wrote the Empress a farewell letter, in which he pointed out that, though he had journeyed to her dominions as the Ambassador of Philosophy, Philosophy had not paid his travelling expenses.

The Empress took the hint, and sent a servant to him with three bags, each containing a thousand roubles. He had asked for less, but he had hoped for more ; so that we find expressions of disappointment breaking out in his letters home. To his wife he presents a balance sheet in which he shows that, when accounts are squared, he will only be £200—and perhaps less—to the good ; while he writes to Mlle Volland : “ You need not be sceptical about my eulogies of this astounding woman, for I have received practically no payment for them.”

A comparison of the gifts received by Diderot with those bestowed upon the Orlofs and others may perhaps help us to measure the importance which Catherine attached to philosophers and favourites respectively. When, that is to say, we get down to the bed-rock of largess, we find the benefits of the Semiramis of the North distributed between these two classes of the community in much the same proportion as by other sovereigns. All that one can say is that her attitude towards both classes alike was

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more effusive than that of other sovereigns ; though it may be to the point to add that her grants to her lovers largely consisted of landed estates and the peasants attached to them, and that, if she had given Diderot an army of ten thousand serfs, he would not have known what to do with them.

Perhaps, too, Diderot would have been able to do more for Philosophy and the practical application of it to methods of government if he had come to St. Petersburg at an earlier date, when Catherine had only just begun to flash signals to the philosophic West, and was setting to work at the reform of her dominions with the vigorous activity of a new broom. She certainly meant well in those days, and was inspired with noble sentiments copied out of the writings of the best authors—notably Montesquieu and Beccaria. Her famous Instruction to the Legislative Commission, issued in 1767, is full of the very noblest sentiments, albeit somewhat of the copy-book order. “The rich,” Catherine wrote, “ought not to oppress the poor.” “Patriotism,” she declares, “is a means of preventing crime.” “Our peoples,” she proclaimed, “do not exist for our benefit, but we exist for theirs.”

With much more in the same tone. Nothing could be better in its way ; but far less came of it than might have been expected. Catherine ran up against the Russian passion for talking instead of acting—for shrugging the shoulders

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and saying “Nitchevo.” Her Senate comported itself like a schoolboys’ debating society. The reports of its proceedings are a ludicrous example of verbose inadequacy to a great task. It devoted six sessions to considering whether the Empress should or should not be styled “Catherine the Great, the Wise, the Mother of her Country ;” and Catherine gave utterance to her impatience. “I summoned you,” she wrote to the President, “to examine the laws of the country, and you spend your time in discussing my personal attributes.”

Nor were the debates much more profitable when the Senate actually got to its task of examining the laws of Russia. We read that a debate on the laws governing the rights of merchants was interrupted in order that Léon Narishkin might read a memorandum on hygiene. We also read that another debate was interrupted in order that a medical senator might intercalate a puff of a remedy for chil-blains. So the deliberations dragged on, and the Ambassadors from the West observed and smiled. They were described by the British Ambassador as “a joke,” and by the French Ambassador as “a comedy.” Catherine got tired of them, and they ceased, leaving the serfs still in slavery, and torture still a recognised part of the machinery of the Courts of Justice. Such reforms as were instituted were not legislative but administrative, and even these were disappointing.

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Catherine, in short, had made the discovery which we have seen her announcing to Diderot : that rulers have to work under different conditions, and with different material, from political philosophers—and that Russian material was particularly difficult to work with. In certain directions, of course, she could make a great display of enlightenment. She could dispatch geographers to explore the remoter parts of her Empire, and decree an expedition to Lapland to observe the transit of Venus ; she could fetch Euler from Berlin to take his place in her Academy of Science, and summon Dimsdale from London to inoculate her with smallpox to the accompaniment of the prayers and hymns of the faithful ; she could import artists and artisans, and invite foreign agriculturists to till the soil of the steppes ; but she could not make Russia a civilised country, because the Russians were not a civilised people. The decree which she promulgated enjoining them not to talk about matters which they did not understand was an insufficient civilising force ; and she tended to grow cynical.

“ These peasants are very dirty—why do they never wash ? ” Diderot once asked her.

“ Why should they trouble to wash, seeing that their bodies belong not to them but to their masters ? ” was Catherine’s reply.

And then there is the story of Prince Galitzin complaining that the Prefect of the St. Peters-

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burg Police had had the presumption to whip the servants of certain highly placed personages,—his own servants among the number,—and Catherine rejoining: “I never draw invidious distinctions between my subjects myself—why should you expect the Prefect of Police to do so ? ”

Whence it appears that equality, in Russian eyes, meant the right of every man to wallop not only his own nigger but his neighbour’s also ; while justice at the same time included the right of a nobleman to wallop, or cause to be walloped by his flunkeys, any tradesman who pressed him unseasonably for the settlement of an account. The transaction sometimes caused trouble when the tradesman was a foreigner with an Ambassador to speak for him ; but among Russians it passed as an ordinary experience in the everyday life of a shopkeeper. The French Ambassador reports that he and his English colleague, differing about many things, agreed in deprecating this particular trait in the Russian character.

Occupation with such domestic matters, however, though not very fruitful of results, must have taken up a good deal of Catherine’s time. She really aspired to be the Mother of her People,—and not merely, to quote the old witticism, of “a good many of them,”—though she set about her maternal duties with amateurish fussiness. If she also aspired to be the head of something of the nature of a matri-

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archal system, at least her first idea was that her favourites should also be her collaborators—her partners in state-craft as well as pleasure. The office of favourite was, as it were, a post in the Civil Service—though not in what we nowadays call the “permanent Civil Service”; and her devotion to a favourite, during the first ten years of her reign, by no means implied neglect of imperial affairs.

Imperial affairs, indeed, could by no means at that period be neglected with impunity; for, in addition to her preoccupation with internal reform and foreign war, Catherine was continually troubled with doubts as to the stability of her throne; and those doubts were not removed by the death of the imbecile Ivan. The shade of her husband still haunted and vexed her. Though she had done her best to make it clear that he had really joined the dead, who tell no tales, there were those of her subjects who remained incredulous. Pretenders arose, assuming the style of Peter III.—not one Pretender only, but several in succession. The first movement of the kind occurred in 1765, and the second in 1769; and then, in 1773, began the more formidable insurrection of Pugachef.

Pugachef was the son of a Cossack of the Don—a military deserter who had served in the Seven Years’ War. It is said (though it is also denied) that he bore a considerable resem-

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blance to Peter III. One first hears of him as a fugitive in Poland, harboured by hermits to whom he related that a Russian officer had once said to him, "If the Emperor Peter III., my master, were not dead, I should believe that I saw him once more in thee ;" and a hermit, returning to the hermitage, and seeing him for the first time, supported this story by exclaiming, "Is not that the Emperor Peter III. ?" The idea that he actually was, or possibly might be, or could plausibly pretend to be, Peter III., was thus implanted in his mind. The hermits and some other ecclesiastics encouraged him because of their dissatisfaction with Catherine's ecclesiastical policy.

Some Russian officials got wind of his proceedings, and arrested him on a charge of sedition. The ecclesiastics provided him with money, and he bribed his guardians and escaped from his prison. When he first raised his standard, in September 1773, he had only nine followers ; but within a few days he was at the head of three hundred rebels. With this force he summoned a town garrisoned by five thousand Cossacks and two regiments of infantry to surrender, giving out that he was indeed Peter III., who had escaped from Ropscha at the instant when his assassins were about to murder him ; that the body of another victim of tyranny had been shown to the populace as his ; that his enemies had hidden him, but that he now appealed for help to restore him to his rights.

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He was believed. The acceptance of such stories is the price which the Russian Government has always had to pay for its dark and devious courses and its policy of keeping the masses in ignorance. The Cossacks came over to Pugachev, with eleven of their officers. The town capitulated; the Governor was hanged. The news of the success, spreading like a prairie fire, brought other adherents—all those who had grievances, and all those who delighted in the prospect of loot. Pugachev soon had fourteen thousand men under his orders, and was strong enough to threaten Moscow.

So it was civil war,—and civil war of the bloodiest and most barbarous character,—a civil war which shook the throne, though it did not avail to overthrow it. The recital of its vicissitudes would be a dull and hardly intelligible business; but one may mention one or two of its atrocities and bizarre spectacular effects. There is a story of a siege of Yaitsk, in which the inhabitants were reduced to the necessity of eating leather; and a story of a siege of Oranburg, in the course of which the citizens made a jelly of the skins of animals, and “pulverising it, made it into bread by mixing with it a little flour.” One reads of the Governor of a captured fortress being impaled alive, and of an astronomer being lifted on to pikes, “so as to be near the stars,” and then hacked to pieces by Cossacks. One also reads

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of the pillage of innumerable country houses, and the ruthless massacre of their inhabitants; of a coinage bearing Pugachev's image and superscription, and the motto *Redivivus et ulti*or; of Pugachev's Court—with peasant girls enrolled as maids-of-honour, compelled to curtsey to their Emperor, and whipped if they did not curtsey properly; and, finally, of Pugachev's marriage—

“ Although he had been married for some years to Sophia, the daughter of a Cossack, and had three children by his union, he had the effrontery at Yaitsk to marry a public woman, and celebrated his nuptials with all the bacchanal licentiousness worthy of the wife he had espoused.”

And, all this time, there was a price of a hundred thousand roubles on Pugachev's head, and Catherine's generals were marching here, there, and everywhere, to entrap him. They defeated him, and cut him off from his supplies, and then his host melted away. As Castera writes—

“ Hunger, thirst, and awakening conscience opened the eyes of his followers. As he was prolonging his miserable life by gnawing the bones of a horse, some of the principal of them ran up to him, saying, ‘ Come, thou hast been long enough Emperor.’ He fired a pistol, and



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shattered the arm of the foremost ; the rest of the Cossacks bound him, ran away with their prisoner over the desert . . . and sent a messenger to the commandant of the place to inform him of what they had done.”

So they took him to Moscow, and then—

“ The sentence passed on Pugachev was that he should have his two hands and both his feet cut off ; that they should be shown to the people ; and that afterwards he should be quartered alive. But this butchering sentence was not fulfilled. By some persons it is said that it was mitigated by a secret order from the Empress. Others pretend that the executioner was less inhuman than the judges ; and others again affirm that it was by a mere mistake of the man. However it may be, Pugachev was first decapitated ; after which his body was cut into quarters, which were exposed in as many quarters of the town. Five of his principal accomplices were likewise beheaded ; three others were hanged ; and eighteen more underwent the knout and were sent to Siberia.”

That was the end of a rebellion which is said to have cost Russia “ the destruction of a great number of towns and of upwards of two hundred and fifty villages, the interruption of the works at the mines of Orenburg, and the whole trade of Siberia.” Catherine affected to treat the matter

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lightly, and jested to Voltaire about “*le marquis de Pugachev.*” Her personal fearlessness at such moments of emergency was one of the elements of her greatness. The rebellion did quite as much as the passive resistance of Russian Conservatives to check her enthusiasm for reform; and it helped to keep her hands full. It was not till about this date, when she was a woman of about forty-five, that she allowed her interests to be concentrated on the affections of her heart, and astonished the spectators of the affairs of her heart alike by her ardour and by her mutability.

CHAPTER XVII

Intrigues against Gregory Orlof—His Supersession in the Post of Favourite by Vasilchikof

IT has already been stated that Gregory Orlof was unfaithful to Catherine, and made havoc of the virtue of her maids-of-honour. The thing was notorious, and all the Ambassadors knew that Catherine was more jealous of her maids' virtue than of her own. They reported that she made scenes with Gregory on account of his misconduct, and that the language in which she publicly reproached him was "somewhat less than decorous." There were rumours, too, that, when she complained in private, Gregory knocked her about; and this was at the time when Catherine was approaching what we are now told to call "the dangerous age."

There is no need to enlarge upon the dangers of that age; but it is to be noted that it does, in Catherine's case, mark an epoch, and was not, in her case, a transitory period of hysteria. No calm, that is to say, succeeded to the storm; and no point was ever reached at which she recognised that youth was over and

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age had been attained. On the contrary, the autumn of her life was occupied with efforts to renew the spring, and was one of those autumns which prolong themselves well into the winter. It began when she was about forty-three, and did not cease until she died, well advanced in the sixties.

She had never, it is true, boasted of being a virgin empress; but her love-affairs had hardly been more miscellaneous than those of her predecessor. Sentiment had been involved in them, and they had been durable. It would have been practically impossible for her, in her position, to seek a consort among foreign princes, and her people would not allow her to raise a subject to the throne; but her alliances, alike with Poniatowski and with Gregory Orlof, had been very much like marriages. She had not been capriciously fickle, and the affairs of her heart only figure incidentally in the narrative of the earlier years of her reign. But now that “dangerous age” was upon her, and with it came a more acute intensity of passion, a more mutable caprice, and a desire for the stimulus of variety.

In a humbler station, or in a Court with more moral traditions, she would have found obstacles in her path; as Empress of All the Russias, she found none. It was not merely that, as an autocrat, she was free, within the limits explained, to do what she liked, even to the extent of flying in the face of public opinion—there was

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practically no public opinion for her to fly in the face of. Ambassadors might smile, or even chuckle—one of them,¹ in fact, got into trouble with his Foreign Office for filling his dispatches with smoking-room stories about her passionate propensities, to the exclusion of graver matters ; but the Ambassadors did not count, and the native atmosphere was entirely favourable to her proceedings. We have seen her senators telling her to her face that they were “ delighted to see their sovereigns select subjects on whom to confer their favours and affections ” ; and we have not to look much further in order to see her taking them at their word. For them as for her, the office of favourite was a post in the Civil Service. The most that a minister ever tried to do was to subject the office to the influences of ministerial jobbery, and arrange thereby to have a friend at Court.

A story is told of an attempt to obtain the office for Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, the famous author of *Paul et Virginie*, who visited Russia in 1764, with a scheme for founding a New Republic on the shores of the Aral Sea ; but that story may very well have been invented by Bernardin himself in his old age, or by Aimé-Martin, his romantic biographer, on his behalf. It is true that Bernardin speaks, in a letter to the French Foreign Minister, M. de Vergennes, of “ the very particular kindness shown to me by Her Imperial Majesty

¹ The Chevalier de Corberon.

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Catherine II."; but it is not clear that the kindness consisted of anything more than a gratuity of fifteen hundred francs, and his latest biographer, M. Maurice Souriau, declares that there is nothing in his papers, preserved at Havre, which confirms the legend.

Probably it is untrue. There is indirect evidence to that effect apart from the fact that in 1764 Orlof's supremacy was hardly challengeable. According to Aimé-Martin, when Bernardin sat one day in Catherine's ante-chamber, waiting for an audience, Orlof "passed through it in his slippers and dressing-gown, leaving M. de Saint-Pierre profoundly distressed, and in a mood to sit down and write a satire against favourites." That certainly does not look as if Bernardin had ever been Gregory's successful rival; and we may fairly leave that story and pass on to the time when real and effective rivals arose.

The first of them was a certain Wysocki, of whom one knows nothing in particular except that Catherine smiled on him for a season and then ceased to smile—and that he was the nominee of Panin and others who wished to see Gregory Orlof deposed from favour. He emerged from the obscurity from which he was so soon to return in 1772, at the time of a terrible outbreak of the plague at Moscow.

The plague had affected the Muscovites much as the cholera affects the Calabrians

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to-day. When they were not dying like flies, they were rioting like hooligans, and superstitiously opposing every sanitary precaution. They murdered the Archbishop ; they broke into the hospitals ; they maltreated the doctors, so that those of them who survived the assault fled from the city. Mistaking an Italian dancing-master for a doctor, they broke both his arms and both his legs, and flung him out into the street to die. The soldiers fled and the Governor retreated before them. It was obviously necessary to send a strong man to Moscow, to stay the plague if he could, and to restore order in any case. It was decided to send Gregory Orlof.

Whether Catherine wished him to go because she was tired of being knocked about, or because she desired the uninterrupted society of his rival, is a matter of conjecture ; but the thought at the back of the brains of her ministers is clear. Most likely, they argued, Orlof would catch the plague and die of it ; and, even if he did not die, there was a very good chance that he would fail and be discredited. They had little faith in his competence, and they knew his habit of neglecting his duties. They expected him to return—if he did return—unsuccessful, to find another favourite installed in his place. In short, they planned his downfall.

But Gregory Orlof did not fail. Perhaps he guessed what his enemies were planning ;

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perhaps he did not need to guess, but realised that much was here at stake, for himself as well as for Russia. At all events, he pulled himself together, as an old athlete sometimes will when there is a sudden call on his energies after he has got out of training, and allowed himself to fall abroad. He dashed off, installed himself in the plague-stricken town, took command of the situation, and issued edicts right and left ; and all the luck was on his side. He had the luck—for which his physician took the credit—to escape the contagion. If he did not actually stay the plague, he had the luck to be present when the plague, after carrying off 133,000 persons, was stayed by the coming on of the cold weather ; and when the death-rate dwindled, order practically restored itself.

So he returned to St. Petersburg in a blaze of glory, passing through a triumphal arch bearing the inscriptions : “Orlof stayed the plague,” and “Such sons has Russia” ; and Catherine’s heart was once more his for a season. The *interim* favourite sank again into the obscurity from which he had been lifted, and Catherine wrote to Voltaire comparing Orlof to Quintus Curtius and other heroes of ancient Rome. Perhaps—though no precise information is available—she even signified that she was proud to be knocked about by such a man ; for she had little of the pride of the purple in these matters, and was quite capable

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of taking the tone of Molière's heroine : *Et s'il me plait d'être battu ?*

Still, Catherine was at the dangerous age, and Orlof had not learnt to be exclusive in his attachments, and his enemies were as jealous as ever, and showed no disposition to disarm. They took a petty revenge on the physician who claimed to have saved his life, keeping him waiting two years for a small indemnity for the loss of his clothes in quarantine, and telling him confidentially that his reward would have been much more prompt if he had been less careful of Orlof's health. They found a fresh excuse for removing Orlof from Court, gave him a fresh opportunity of making a mess of an important public service, while they brought other admirers to Catherine's notice during his absence.

That is how he came to be sent to Fokchany, to negotiate a peace after the war with Turkey ; and this time he was sufficiently blinded by arrogance to play into his enemies' hands. Though Catherine sent him off in great style, with twenty-four liveried servants, in a sumptuous coach which is said to have cost a million roubles, he had the indiscretion to quarrel with her at the moment of his departure by proposing that one of her ladies-in-waiting should accompany him on his journey ; while, on his arrival at the seat of the negotiations, he comported himself with an insolence worthy of Brennus and the Gauls. He quarrelled with

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the Russian commander-in-chief, and threw a plate of jam in his face. He quarrelled with the Turkish plenipotentiary, and boxed his ears, saying, in reply to all remonstrances, that that was the only way of dealing satisfactorily with such people. Then, for no ostensible reason, he broke off the negotiations and retired to Jassy, where he swaggered about in a coat of many colours, embroidered with priceless diamonds.

His enemies needed no more. Catherine was still attached to him. She was still praising him, in letters to Mme de Bielke, as “the handsomest man of the day,” and gushing over Nature’s generosity to him in the matter of “good looks, intelligence, and heart, and soul.” But it could be represented to her that such powerful subjects were a peril to sovereigns ; and seductive rivals could be sought out and introduced. The Comte de Manteuffel was proposed ; but he “preferred a simple and philosophic life to the glittering splendour of a corrupt Court,” and fled to his estates in Livonia. Lieutenant Vasilchikof of the Horse Guards was more amenable. Baron de Solms, the Prussian Ambassador, reported his promotion to Frederick the Great—

“ I have just seen this M. de Vasilchikof, and recognised him as a man whom I had often seen before at the Court, where he was lost in the crowd. He is of medium height, about twenty-eight years of age, of dark com-

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plexion, and tolerably good-looking. He has always been very polite towards everybody, gentle and timid in his manners, and he is so still. He gives one the impression of being embarrassed with the part which he is playing. The Court, on the whole, seems to disapprove of the affair. It causes a great to-do among the family and friends of Count Orlof, who are looking baffled, pensive, and dissatisfied. . . . The Empress is in the best of tempers, always gay and pleased with herself, and entirely given up to festivities and dissipations."

A similar message was, at the same time, transmitted to Orlof by one of his friends ; and he conceived that this was a matter of much greater urgency than his public duties. He left the peace negotiations to look after themselves, jumped into a carriage, and galloped the thousand leagues, galloping night and day, which separated him from St. Petersburg. He was expected and stopped—told that the quarantine regulations forbade him to proceed farther at present, and invited to retire for a season to his estate at Gatchina. It was the estate which he had offered, at Catherine's suggestion, to place at the disposal of Rousseau on the ground that "the air is healthy, the water is good, and the hill-sides environing a number of lakes are eminently suitable for reveries," and that "there would be plenty of shooting and fishing."

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Perhaps Orlof shot and fished—he certainly was in no mood to engage in philosophic contemplations, and walk “with inward glory crowned.” Catherine was afraid that his reveries would have violent ends, and caused a new lock to be placed on her new favourite’s door, for the discomfiture of possible assassins ; but that was a superfluous precaution. When Orlof did get to St. Petersburg, and made the acquaintance of the new favourite, he was very polite to him, drove in the streets with him, and only quitted his society in order to engage in a drunken debauch. And, in the meantime, negotiations proceeded, almost as between potentates, concerning Orlof’s future arrangements.

They were negotiations of which the issue hung for some time in the balance. Vasilchikof was a weak man, though he had the old families of Russia for his backers. Orlof was a strong man, though he had influential enemies. Moreover, Catherine’s tenderness for Orlof had not been entirely killed by his bad treatment of her ; and her new passion for Vasilchikof was little more than a passing caprice. The situation, therefore, was full of interesting possibilities, of which the discomfiture of the new favourite by the old one was not the least possible. In the end, as we shall see, it was solved by the advent of a third suitor—a suitor who was clever as well as strong ; but a good deal was to happen first, and we must pause to watch the vicissitudes of the struggle.



CHAPTER XVIII

Marriage, Travels, Misfortunes, and Death of Gregory Orlof

IT was never Catherine's desire to disgrace the favourites whom she discarded. She preferred to regard them as superannuated functionaries who retired from the most dignified post in her Civil Service. She liked to honour them on the occasion of their retreat, and accord them magnificent retiring allowances. She cherished, and wished them to cherish, the most agreeable recollections of her favour, and saw no reason why those who had been her lovers should not stoop to become her friends. As a rule, they were willing to do so.

Gregory Orlof's case, however, differed in some particulars from that of the others. His dismissal was not entirely due to personal reasons, though personal reasons were factors in it, but was in part contrived by a cabal, jealous not of his privileges but of his influence. That is one side of the picture; and the other side of it is coloured by his reluctance to accept his deposition. For ten years he had occupied the first place in Catherine's heart; and pride

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forbade him to yield it, without a struggle, to another. He was not, indeed, a man to overturn a throne because an Empress had proved untrue. Those enemies of his who feared that were alarmed by an imaginary danger. But he was a man to be indignant, to sulk, to spurn proffered consolations with scorn, to assume an air of injured innocence—to give, in short, all the trouble that he could, and lose no chance of making his mistress feel her cruelty.

The rumour ran in diplomatic circles that a thousand soldiers were in his pay, and ready to do anything for him; that all the archbishops were ardent supporters of his suit; that he had entered Catherine's palace in disguise at a masked ball, and that Catherine had fled for refuge to Panin's apartment. Durand reported those stories to his Government for what they might be worth; and many other stories, equally circumstantial and more credible, have been preserved.

Invited to resign his public offices, Gregory Orlof declined to do so, saying that if the Empress wished to get rid of him, she must dismiss him. Offered permission to travel abroad for the benefit of his health, he replied that he was not complaining of his health, and needed neither medical treatment nor change of air. Threatened with imprisonment at Ropscha, he said that he would be delighted to entertain Catherine even there, if she would deign to visit him. Called upon to return the portrait,

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framed in diamonds, which Catherine had given him, he handed over the diamonds, but retained the portrait, saying that he would only restore it to the hand from which he had received it. When Catherine sent him a roll of gold coins fresh from the mint, he ostentatiously passed on her gift to his friend General Pohlmann.

The incident was reported to Catherine in the expectation that she would resent it; but she understood, and was melted to tenderness—

“ My God! Aren’t you satisfied yet? ” she is reported to have said. “ You have achieved your end—you have banished him from my Court; but you will never banish him from my heart. I am going to send him another and a more valuable present, which I hope he will receive with a better grace.”

And she sent him a service of silver plate and a draft for fifty thousand roubles—gifts which he did not throw back at her head. Evidently her heart looked back, even when her fancy strayed; and presently she restored her favourite to offices of which she had deprived him, and his complete restoration to favour seemed probable. But it did not follow; and Catherine is said thus to have announced her candid programme to a confidante—

“ I am under great obligations to the Orlof family. I have enriched and honoured them.

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I shall always protect them, and they may be very useful to me. But my mind is made up. I have put up with a great deal during the last eleven years ; and I wish now to live as I like, in entire independence. As for the Prince, he can do whatever he thinks good : travel, if he likes, or remain in Russia if he prefers—get drunk, go hunting, or keep mistresses.”

And Durand, who reports the confidence, adds as a character sketch of Orlof—

“ He is by nature a Russian peasant, and that is what he will remain until the end. He loves as indiscriminately as he eats, and can get on just as well with a Calmuck or a Finn as with a pretty woman of the Court. That is the sort of clown he is. Still, he has a certain natural intelligence, and means well. His great passion is avarice.”

That passion, at any rate, was gratified abundantly. Gregory Orlof’s retiring pension was no less than a hundred and fifty thousand roubles ; and he was given, at the same time, the lump sum of one hundred thousand roubles, and an estate with six thousand serfs attached to it. Thus endowed, he accepted the suggestion that he should go abroad, the title of Prince of the Holy Roman Empire being bestowed upon him at last in order that he might cut a figure worthy of a deposed imperial favourite. A

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footnote in Castera's *Life* of Catherine gives us some idea of the sort of figure that he cut—

“ He appeared at Paris in a coat all the buttons whereof were large diamonds, and with a sword having the hilt also set with diamonds ; at Spa he quite eclipsed the Duc de Chartres (since known under the names of Orleans and Égalité) and all the other princes there, and he played for such stakes as frightened the most intrepid gamesters. He afterwards made his appearance at Versailles at a ball given on occasion of the marriage of Madame Clotilde, dressed in a plain frock of coarse cloth.”

His first thought, that is to say, was to cut a dash, and his second to express his contempt for anyone who presumed to try to cut a greater dash. One is accustomed to hear such stories of the Belles Oteros and Lianes de Pougy of this world ; and it is with them that Gregory Orlof has, in the end, to be classed.

His jaunt, however, was a brief one. At the end of a year we find him, after having reminded Diderot of “ a caldron always on the boil but never cooking anything,” back once more at St. Petersburg, and once more on very friendly, though not intimate, terms with Catherine. She gave him a palace—an additional palace, for she had already given him several ; and his return gift was the famous Nadir Shah diamond, for which he paid four hundred and sixty

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thousand roubles. It still looked as if he might, by such means, re-conquer (or re-purchase) his old position ; for Catherine was still writing of him (to Grimm) in terms of affectionate admiration as late as 1776 ; but there were difficulties too great to be surmounted—

“ Prince Orlof,” reports Durand to his Government, “ tells me that he has had a singular explanation with the Empress, and that he replied to her attempts to dissuade him from his plans of foreign travel by saying that he could no longer endure to see how his friends and relatives were being persecuted, though no complaint could be made against him except the lack of that vigour which Nature had ceased to vouchsafe to him.”

There may have been something in that, though Gregory Orlof was only forty-two. An endeavour to make love to the Empress and all her maids-of-honour simultaneously may have prematurely aged even a lover cast in his heroic mould. Moreover, his rival was now no longer Vasilchikof but Potemkin. A rival of no importance, that is to say, had been succeeded by a rival who would stand no nonsense, and was strong enough to bar the way effectively. He shall be introduced more formally, and with more particulars, in a moment. For the instant it suffices to note that the Orlofs themselves had presented him at the Court at which he was

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to supplant and succeed the favourite, and that Gregory, being supplanted, sought consolation elsewhere, and fell in love with, and married, his cousin, Mlle Zinovief.

Catherine, it seems, was not altogether pleased. She hankered, it appears, after Gregory Orlof's sighs, even when she preferred the ardour of a younger suitor; desired the experience of being loved in vain, and felt that it behoved Gregory, as a loyal subject, at least to keep single for her sake. One infers as much, not unreasonably, from the fact that a decree of the Senate nullified his marriage on the ground that the bride and bridegroom were within the forbidden degrees. But then we see Catherine, her fit of resentment passed, changing her mind, and making a display of magnanimity, overruling the decree of the Senate, and sending Princess Orlof a golden toilet set as a wedding present. Bride and bridegroom went to Switzerland for their honeymoon, and were happy.

But only for five short years. Princess Orlof was consumptive, and the malady made rapid progress. Her husband took her from place to place, to consult all the specialists of the day; but the most learned specialists of that date knew nothing about consumption, and could therefore do nothing for their patient. Princess Dashkof met the wanderers at Leyden, and again at Brussels. She says that Orlof suggested to her that her son (then aged seven-

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teen) should aspire to the post of favourite from which he had retired ; but she was not a truthful person, and one does not know whether to believe her or not. However that may be, the Princess gradually wasted away until she died in 1782, and Gregory himself only survived her about six months. It is said that his enemies found a means of giving him a drug which deprived him of his reason ; but that is another of those stories, so frequent in Russian history, which cannot be proved and need not be accepted—

“ Though I had every reason to expect the painful event,” wrote Catherine, conveying the news of his death to Grimm, “ I assure you I am deeply afflicted by it. It is in vain that people repeat to me, and that I repeat to myself, all the commonplaces proper to such occasions. Sobs are my only answers, and I am in a terrible state of distress.”

So that, in spite of all that had happened, something of the old tenderness remained.

CHAPTER XIX

Gregory Potemkin—His Early Life—His Military Services—
His Promotion to be Favourite in place of Vasilchikof

POTEMKIN came from Smolensk, where he was born, of poor but noble parents, in or about 1740. One of his great-uncles had been Peter the Great's Ambassador at the Court of St. James's; his sisters married into the great families of Samoilof and Davidof; but his father was an undistinguished officer, who saw no active service, and retired with the rank of major. He himself was intended for the priesthood, and was to that end sent to a theological college, where he became a model pupil, well versed in his liturgy.

In this character of model pupil, well versed in the liturgy, he was, together with other model pupils, sent, at the public cost, to St. Petersburg, to be "inspected." He did not dazzle St. Petersburg, but St. Petersburg dazzled him. It was borne in upon him, at the frivolous Court of Elizabeth, that theology was not the whole of life, or even three-parts of life, but only one of life's minor issues. On his return to his theological college, he treated

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his studies with such contempt that his preceptors expelled him as “an idler who cut his lectures.” Retiring, he obtained permission to enlist in the Horse Guards; and that was where the outbreak of Catherine’s revolution found him.

It was a revolution, as we have seen, made by subalterns, with the countenance and connivance of Panin and one or two other Elder Statesmen; and the subalterns forced the hands of the Elder Statesmen by proclaiming Catherine Empress instead of putting her forward merely as Regent during the minority of the Grand Duke Paul. Potemkin held only non-commissioned rank at the time, but he nevertheless contrived to make himself helpful and prominent. It is said to have been he who disconcerted the Elder Statesmen by raising the cry: “Long live Catherine, Empress of All the Russias!” first in the barrack yard and then again in the Kazan church. It is also said that Catherine wore a cockade torn from his cap when she took the field against her husband. He was, at any rate, one of her personal escort on that occasion, and was with Gregory Orlof at Oranienbaum when Peter III. signed the Act of Abdication, and rode with the carriage which conveyed Peter to his prison at Ropscha. His reward was the grade of second lieutenant, and a Court sinecure, carrying with it a pension of two thousand roubles. The fact that he was first

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proposed for the rank of cornet only, and that Catherine herself declared the promotion inadequate, shows that she had remarked him, and did not accept him merely at the Orlofs' valuation.

Somehow or other, he was granted admission into that inner circle in which the Empress unbent, and permitted her male friends to call her by her Christian name. It is said that the Orlofs themselves presented him as a buffoon with a remarkable turn for mimickry —the very thing to beguile an idle hour. It is also said that he mimicked the Empress to her face, to her intense amusement, and that she thereupon granted him permission to call her Catherine, like the others. It is added that the Orlofs soon became jealous of their protégé, observing that the Empress permitted him to squeeze her hand in the course of parlour games; that they picked a quarrel with him in the billiard-room, and that the unconscionable Alexis knocked his eye out with the cue. The fact that he lost one of his eyes somewhere, in a rough-and-tumble with somebody, is, at any rate, well established.

Beyond that, however, one knows very little about his early life, and can add but few touches to the picture of him as a young man who hung about the Court, calling the Empress by her Christian name, and earning his bread by his buffooneries, while awaiting his turn for preferment. It has been said that he made

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a bid for preferment by assisting at the death of Peter III. ; but that he always strenuously denied. There is probably more truth in the statement that Catherine prepared him for preferment by appointing a French nobleman as his tutor, and placing him in a Government office, to familiarise him with public affairs. That was the sort of thing she liked to do ; and Potemkin, unlike Gregory Orlof, was both young enough and far-sighted enough to let her do it. Buffoon or not, he must have been recognisable as a young man who would make his way ; though it was not until the outbreak of the Turkish war, in 1768, that he began to emerge.

His rank was only that of captain when he went to the front with a special recommendation to Romanzof. Within a few months we find him promoted to be a major-general " on account of his courage and the great military abilities which he has displayed on all occasions." What he had actually done to merit the promotion is not clear. The theory that the commander-in-chief, reading between the lines of Catherine's letter of recommendation, and divining that the young captain might be a useful friend at Court, put him in the way of winning distinctions without incurring perils, is more plausible than any other ; but there is also the theory that he acted as a Court spy at the military headquarters, and sent home secret reports to the detriment of his superiors.

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His successes, at any rate, were rather like a flash in the pan. From the end of 1769 until the middle of 1773 we hear practically nothing of him; and Laveaux writes that “he spent all his time in his dressing-gown, with the air of a man wrapped in profound reflection.”

It seems a queer uniform, and also a queer occupation, for a major-general on active service; but everything was possible in the military Russia of that date, and we are not entitled to be more than mildly sceptical. The commander-in-chief may very possibly have preferred the coadjutor who sulked in flowing silks to that other, more haughty, coadjutor who pelted him with jam; and it is, at any rate, pleasant to picture him balancing their comparative claims to his affection and regard. Whatever his choice, however, Catherine had made hers; and the major-general in the dressing-gown was presently cheered by the receipt of a letter in her handwriting.

“My dear lieutenant-general,” she began, thus signifying his elevation to a higher grade; and she went on—

“I suppose you are too busy with your duties in Silistria to have time to read letters. I do not know how you are getting on with your bombardment; but I am quite sure that your activities are due to personal loyalty to myself, and to that dear fatherland which you

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delight to serve. Still, as I should be very sorry to lose the services of any man of zeal, courage, intelligence, and ability, I implore you not to expose yourself to unnecessary danger. Perhaps, when you have read this letter, you will wonder why I wrote it. Then I will tell you. It was in order to let you know how highly I think of you, and how sincerely I am your well-wisher."

Though the letter said but little, it obviously meant more than it said. Potemkin, as was natural, was startled by it out of his dressing-gown into his uniform—startled into demanding leave of absence and setting out on a journey which could not very well be accomplished in a dressing-gown. By the middle of January 1774 he was back in St. Petersburg, after travelling with a haste equal to Orlof's, when the news reached him of the favours bestowed, in his absence, on Vasilchikof; but, as to the next scene in the comedy, more than one story is told.

Some writers lay that scene in a monastery. They say that Potemkin posed as the inconsolable lover, resolved to shave his head, renounce his uniform (and his dressing-gown) for a cowl, and exchange the pomp and vanity of this wicked world for the pious seclusion of the cloister, because he feared that he had fixed his hopes upon unattainable satisfactions. They add that Catherine sent her confidante, the

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Countess Bruce, to him in his retreat with a reassuring message to the effect that he need not despair ; that the Countess Bruce returned with the report that love had driven him mad ; that Catherine herself then went to the monastery and declared her love ; that Potemkin only consented to accept her love on condition that she would give him a rank so exalted that the ridicule of the Court could not affect him ; that Catherine agreed to his terms.

Things may have happened so—the negative cannot be proved ; but there is more probability in the story that Potemkin himself made a written application for the grade of “ general aide-de-camp ”—the titular military status of the imperial favourites. In any case, whether he sought the honour openly, or so manœuvred that it was thrust upon him, he obtained it, and entered at once on his new duties. One may give Castera’s picture of those duties—or rather of that portion of them which outsiders were privileged to observe—

“ When Her Majesty had fixed her choice on a new favourite,” we read, “ she created him her general aide-de-camp, in order that he might accompany her everywhere without attracting reproach or inviting observation. Thenceforward the favourite occupied in the Palace an apartment beneath that of the Empress, to which it communicated by a private staircase. The first day of his installation, he

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received a present of a hundred thousand roubles, and every month he found twelve thousand on his dressing-table. The marshal of the Court was commissioned to provide him a table of twenty-four covers, and to defray all the expenses of his household. The favourite attended the Empress on all parties of amusement, at the opera, at balls, promenades, excursions of pleasure, and the like, and was not allowed to leave the Palace without express permission. He was given to understand that it would not be taken well if he conversed familiarly with other women ; and if he went to dine with any of his friends, the mistress of the house was always absent. . . . It was on the selection of Potemkin that these formalities began ; and since that time they have been constantly observed.”

The favourite, that is to say, lived in a cage, though the cage was generously gilded. Discontent with the restrictions of the cage was unquestionably a factor in the abbreviation of more than one liaison, and it can hardly have been without its bearing on the development of Potemkin’s own position. We will consider that question, however, in a later place. Before coming to it, we have to see what the world said about the new man and the new situation.

The Empress herself reported the change in what we may fairly call a *lettre de faire part*,

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addressed to Grimm, who had presumed to remonstrate with her on the versatility of her temper—

“ Why do you say this ? ” she asked. “ I will lay a wager that I know. It is because I have got rid of a certain excellent, but very tiresome, citizen, whose place was immediately taken—I really can hardly tell you how—by one of the greatest, most droll, and most amusing originals of this age of iron. Ah me ! What a head my new friend has ! He had more than anyone else to do with the conclusion of the Peace, and he is as good company as the Devil.”

That is how she announced the dismissal of Vasilchikof, who had been sent to Moscow, where he passes out of our story—1,100,000 roubles to the good. Already, it will be seen, she recognised not only Potemkin’s social qualities, but also his strength of character. In diplomatic circles, also, it was felt that the new favourite would have to be taken more seriously than the favourite who had been asked to retire. Durand, indeed, depreciated him, reporting to Versailles that his conduct during the war had scandalised the Turks and excited the derision of the Russians—which, indeed, is not unlikely if it be true that he spent two years and a half on active service in his dressing-gown ; but Gunning, the British Chargé d’Affaires,

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while speaking of his huge, ungainly form and disagreeable physiognomy, added that “he seems to have more sense than the majority of the Russians,” and “may reasonably hope, thanks to his own qualities and the indolence of his rivals, to reach the heights to which his limitless ambition aspires ;” while Vasilchikof himself admitted, in a burst of confidence which reached the Embassies, that Potemkin altogether outclassed him—

“ He stands,” he said, “ on a very different footing from me. I was only in the position of a kept woman. That is how I was treated. I was never allowed to see anybody, or to go out alone. When I asked a favour, I got no answer, whether the favour was for myself or for others. Thinking I should like the cordon of St. Anne, I asked the Empress for it ; and, on the following morning, when I put my hand in my pocket, I found—notes to the value of thirty thousand roubles. She always shut my mouth like that, and sent me to my room. Potemkin, on the contrary, gets whatever he chooses to ask for. He simply dictates his wishes. He is the master.”

A generous testimonial truly from a defeated to a triumphant rival ; but one suspects that Vasilchikof was rather glad than otherwise to be asked to go. We have read that he appeared to be embarrassed by his part ; there

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is no record of his having appeared to be embarrassed by the 1,100,000 roubles which he received for playing it. Potemkin's rise, indeed, was far more annoying to Orlof than to him, though the affability of their intercourse surprised the *corps diplomatique*. They met one day, we are told, on the grand staircase of the Palace, and exchanged civil words—

“ What is the Court news ? ”

“ I know of none except that you are going upstairs, and I am coming down.”

That is all that one knows to have passed between them. They waved each other a courteous farewell, and went their several ways. Orlof, as we have already seen, departed on his travels, returned to marry, and then travelled again, pursuing the vain quest of a physician who could cure his young wife of the disease which was killing her. He never ceased to be a person of great social influence and consideration ; but he now passes out of our story, leaving Potemkin free to follow the promptings of his inordinate ambition, and make more of the office of favourite than any of his predecessors had ever contrived to make of it.

CHAPTER XX

Potemkin's Inordinate Ambitions — His Desire to Marry Catherine — His Retention of his Public Offices after ceasing to be Favourite — Rise and Fall of Zavadovski

POTEMKIN'S ambition was nothing less than to govern Russia—and to be seen governing it. From first to last he was far more anxious to rule the Empire than to embrace the Empress. It may be an exaggeration to say that he only embraced the Empress as a means towards ruling the Empire ; but it is the sort of exaggeration which is more illuminating than the truth. He wanted to multiply and monopolise offices, to stuff his pockets with roubles, to have vast armies of serfs tilling the soil for his profit, and to see his breast spangled with the stars, crosses, and ribbons of all the European Orders of Chivalry.

On the whole, he got what he wanted. His serfs were like the sands of the seashore for multitude, and the number of his roubles was fifty millions. A seat in the Privy Council and the office of Minister of War were his almost at once. Other offices, both military and civil, fell to him as he desired them ; and it was

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much the same with the Orders—though there were exceptions. When he asked for the Garter, he found that he might as well have asked for the moon; for though there may be “no d——d nonsense about merit” in connection with the Garter, it is not a distinction available for the paramours of Empresses. When he asked for the Golden Fleece, he was met with an equally firm *non possumus*, on the ground that the Golden Fleece was only for Catholics. But the King of Prussia gave him the Order of the Black Eagle, the King of Denmark the Order of the Elephant, and the King of Sweden the Order of the Seraphim; the Emperor of Austria made him, as he had made Orlof, a Prince of the Holy Roman Empire; and Catherine gave him, as she had given Orlof, permission to wear her portrait, set in diamonds, in his buttonhole. “I do not,” wrote the French Attaché, M. de Corberon, to his brother, “like this outward and visible sign of a favour which ought only to be suspected”; but Potemkin was a man who set great store by the visible signs of his advancement.

It must be added, however, that he obtained them by insistence, and not by cajolery. Since he was Catherine’s lover, she must be assumed to have been in love with him; but his appearance and manners, in so far as we have been made acquainted with them, were by no means those of a squire of dames. He was one-eyed,

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as has been said ; and with his one eye he squinted. He was bow-legged, and had the habit of biting his nails. He swilled kvass and ate garlic. He frequently forgot, for days together, to brush his hair or wash his face ; and he slopped about in a dressing-gown and slippers—not even wearing trousers underneath the dressing-gown ; and he gave audience to notables—and even to fashionable ladies—in that incomplete attire. Decidedly, he was not a decorative lover—a fact to which he himself bore silent testimony by his reluctance to have his portrait painted ; and we shall find it difficult, as we proceed, to infer any special beauty of character from the records of his conduct. But he was a strong man ; and Catherine, great as she was, had many feminine traits. As, in the past, she had allowed herself to be knocked about by Orlof, so now she allowed herself to be ordered about by Potemkin. He was so encouraged that he presumed, even as Orlof had done, to persuade her to try to bestow her hand where she had already bestowed her heart.

His method of procedure, however, was different from Orlof's. Whereas Orlof had had backers, Potemkin acted for himself ; and whereas Orlof had relied upon political considerations, Potemkin's trump card was religious—as perhaps was natural in the case of a man educated in a theological college. He induced Catherine to accompany him on a pilgrimage

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to the monastery of Troitza, near Moscow ; and he contrived that Panin—whose opposition he, like Orlof, feared—should not be of the party. That done—and Panin, being now fatter than ever, was left behind without difficulty—he set his scene and played his comedy, with the help of the monks, who, in view of his early ecclesiastical associations, were his cordial supporters to a man.

As the curtain rises, Catherine is discovered alone—whether engaged in prayer or awaiting the homage of the fathers does not matter. To her presently there enter shaven monks, with words of pious remonstrance on their lips. Some of them implore, and others threaten ; but the burden of menace and entreaty is the same. The Empress, they take leave to say,—may they be forgiven for saying it ! but it is their duty to her and to the Church,—is living in open sin. The thing is a scandal, a stumbling-block, a rock of offence in Russia. The Church cannot approve of a union which the Church has not been called upon to bless. The Autocrat of All the Russias, though the Head of the Church, is not above its laws. Like the humblest of her subjects, she must marry (or separate from her lover) if she does not wish to burn. Let her take heed, while it is yet time ! Let her reflect !

And so on and so forth, with the audacity of admonition of which privileged ecclesiastics are sometimes capable, until the door opened yet again, and Potemkin entered—*quantum*

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mutatus ab illo ! Not in his gay uniform, glittering with decorations; not even in his gay dressing-gown of flowing silks; but in the dark, monastic garb. His head was not yet shaven—and very likely his hair was, as usual, long and tousled—but he was, at least, a monk in the making, if not yet a monk fully made; and the words on his lips were the words of pious resignation. The Holy Father Superior, he said, had spoken to him, and convinced him of sin. It had been brought home to him that the life which he was living was a continual affront to God. He would not—could not—continue it, but must repent, in sackcloth and ashes, and make amends. Marriage, of course, would be a sufficient reparation of his heinous fault; but he supposed it was impossible. If so—if the Empress would not make him an honest man—then the only way was for him to make himself a holy man, resigning his worldly prospects, joining his friends the monks, taking the vow of celibacy, and devoting the remainder of his allotted span of life to prayer and meditation.

It was a bold stroke, and—the fat Panin being out of the way—there was a chance that it might succeed. Catherine was not a religious woman; but she knew for how much religion counted in Russia, and what support it could give to any cause or proceeding. Moreover, the convent provided every facility for a wedding service, and she had acquired the habit of doing as Potemkin told her. If she had been

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seeking an excuse for weakness, she could have found all the excuses that she wanted. But she was not seeking one.

Perhaps, though she did not mind being bullied, she did not like being jockeyed. Perhaps she was still afraid of Panin, who certainly was not afraid of her. Perhaps she was beginning to realise the mutability of her own restless heart. Perhaps, after all, she was repelled by the conception of a one-eyed major-general, unkempt and redolent of garlic, slopping about the Palace in a dressing-gown and slippers, or squinting at her across her boudoir table, for the remainder of her life. Perhaps, again, Potemkin had postponed his comedy too long ; so that Catherine's eyes had already begun to roam, and her fancy to follow her eyes, and her heart to follow her fancy. Perhaps she had already begun to be sensible of the charms of Zavadovski. Whatever her motives, she made it clear that, if comedies were to be played, her own gifts as a *comédienne* must be reckoned with. So she listened to Potemkin, as she had listened to the priests, and waited for her cue, and took it up ; but she said nothing about marriage, confining her remarks to religion and its obligations.

Of course, she said, religion must come first. Her respect for religion had always been profound. Far be it from her, therefore, to urge a religious man to ignore the promptings of his conscience ! If Potemkin felt as he said,

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then it was only right and proper that he should act as he proposed. The case was a sad one—equally sad for both of them ; but sin was sin, and duty was duty, all the same. She would weep, but she would submit, resigning her lover into the arms of Mother Church, rejoicing to think that she had only a spiritual rival in his heart. Since God called him, there was nothing for it but that he should obey the call.

Such was her answer : and it was not at all the answer that Potemkin had expected. Still, he had invited it, or at least laid himself open to it ; so that no effective rejoinder was possible. He had been taken at his word, and he could not complain. Catherine bade him an affectionate and dignified farewell, and left him using language most inappropriate to the holy garb he had adopted. He cursed and swore. He threatened to become an Archbishop, but he thought better of the threat ; and it is an open question whether he withdrew from the office of favourite on his own motion, or because Catherine signified her wish that he should do so. By acting as favourite for a season, he had driven in what Sainte-Beuve has called the *clou d'or d'amitié* ; and it may be that that sufficed for him. He certainly was not the man to accept the restrictions which Catherine liked to impose upon her favourites ; and his aim seems to have been to continue to exploit his Empress while ceasing to embrace her—to give himself a grievance, and then to demand com-

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pensation. The story that he so manœuvred, by feigning illness, as to be supplanted without giving offence, is credible, and may be accepted.

In any case, he was supplanted ; and if it suited him better to jilt than to be jilted, he got his way. Whether Catherine gave him a rival during his absence in the provinces or during his presence in the capital is not quite clear ; but he presently found Zavadovski installed in the apartment which he had been privileged to occupy, and he handled the situation like a man of genius—very differently from the manner in which Orlof had handled the situation created by the preferment of Vasilchikof.

He knew Catherine well enough not to be afraid of disobeying her ; and he had taken Zavadovski's measure. He recognised him as an Adonis of no particular importance, qualified, by his knowledge of languages, for the position which he held as Catherine's secretary, but not a man likely to wield influence, or capable of browbeating opposition. If there was browbeating to be done, it was Potemkin, with his one eye and savage squint, who would carry off the honour of the contest. So he set to work. Catherine sent him a message that he had better travel for the benefit of his health ; but he declined to budge. On the contrary, he repaired to the Court, and sat down at Catherine's card-table ; and she overlooked his disobedience, and let him join the game. Later, he got his chance of talking to her ; and then he made vigorous

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representations, bellowing at her with his deep voice like an infuriated bull.

So she wished to discard him—very well. So she had introduced her secretary into his apartments like a thief in the night—no matter. Her heart was her own, and she was free to dispose of it as she liked—he was making no grievance about that. But he was not, like the others, a mere paramour to beguile her idle hours—he had rights and claims which must not be treated so cavalierly. He was a general, a Minister of State, a Prince of the Holy Roman Empire—he could be a formidable enemy and a useful friend. Did Catherine think her throne so well established that she had no need of him ? If so, she was very much mistaken. There were cabals. There was an Orlof faction ; there was a Panin faction ; there were those who wished to depose her in favour of the Grand Duke Paul. Did she feel safe ? Did she regard Zavadovski as a sufficient tower of strength against those intrigues ? Was not a friend, whose interests were her own, even more necessary to her than a lover ?—especially if that friend might, supposing his friendship to be rejected, become an enemy ? If she wanted her pleasures, she must have them—it was no part of his duty to interfere ; but she must not mistake the ministers of her pleasures for statesmen, or push aside, in the interest of handsome young secretaries or subalterns, the men who were really capable of ruling Russia.

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Thus Potemkin thundered, and Catherine trembled before him. She did not presume to reproach him with inconsistency, or to remind him of what he had so lately said about the awful consequences of living in open sin. It was quite recognised between them that that talk belonged to a comedy which had failed and need not be referred to. Potemkin proposed to have his pleasures, while leaving Catherine hers, and to continue to live, while also letting her continue to live, the life which he had professed to find so revolting to his naturally pious inclinations. But he also proposed to rule Russia, and to rule Catherine, even to the extent of appointing himself the director of her pleasures, exercising a veto on its instruments, and keeping a panel of favourites from which she might make her selection.

And he got his way by the sheer display of brutal power, and exercised a far wider and deeper influence in his new position than in his old one. For years he was practically Dictator of Russia, and Catherine was like a child in his hands—albeit a child who sometimes gave him trouble. He said, among other things,—smashing glass and china with his emphatic gestures,—that, just as Vasilchikof had gone, so now Zavadovski must go; and Zavadovski went—the number of roubles which he took with him being 1,380,000.

CHAPTER XXI

M. de Corberon at St. Petersburg—His Reports on the
Favourites—Zavadovski—Korsakof—Zoritch

ABOUT Zavadovski there is little to be said (beyond what has been said already) except that he was a Ukrainian and the son of a clergyman, and was succeeded in his office by Lieutenant Zoritch. About Zoritch, again, there is little to be related except that he was Potemkin's nominee, and went about saying that Potemkin had charged him one hundred thousand roubles for the introduction. It would have been worth his while to pay an even larger sum, for he did better than either his predecessor or Vasilchikof. His emoluments, though he only held office for about a twelve-month, were no less than 1,420,000 roubles.

Apparently he was of the type of Zavadovski—"only more so"; an Adonis, like Zavadovski, but more empty-headed, and without Zavadovski's knowledge of languages and secretarial aptitudes. Potemkin, it is said, always put forward a fool for the post of favourite in preference to a man of ability. The Empress, he knew, did not suffer fools gladly, even

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when she admired their good looks. Their folly was a stimulus to her mutability; and her mutability suited Potemkin's plans. He could always have a new fool ready to take an old fool's place. When the office of favourite was filled by a rapid succession of fools, it would be stripped of political importance, and he, the maker of favourites, would be greater than any of them, and would rule Russia either through them or in spite of them. Catherine, he had realised, liked to be ruled by a strong man, though she preferred to renew her youth by smiling upon handsome young subalterns and secretaries. So he put forward Zoritch, as we have seen; and after Zoritch he proposed Korsakof, and then Lanskoi, and Yermolof, and Mamonof — all of them men whom he could flick out of his way if they crossed the path of his ambition. It was a period of quick changes in Catherine's heart, succeeding to the period of long fidelities—not altogether uncoloured by sentiment, as the course of the narrative will show, but on the whole, perhaps, lending itself rather better to the jests of the smoking-room than to ecstatic contemplation of the *âme sensible*.

It was towards the beginning of this period that the Chevalier de Corberon came to St. Petersburg, where he was attached to the Embassy of the Marquis de Juigné, and acted for some time as French Chargé d'Affaires. He has already been mentioned as the diplo-

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matist who was reprimanded by his Government for filling his dispatches with smoking-room stories about the Empress and her admirers, to the exclusion of matters of political importance. It may be urged in his defence that he was very young; that the things which he saw and heard at the Court of St. Petersburg struck him as very strange; and that it was not unnatural for him to suppose that the French Foreign Office would wish to be informed of them. So he looked in through that window on the Neva to which we have so often had occasion to refer, and surveyed what he saw from the point of view of a man of the world who was not yet old enough or experienced enough to be *blasé*. The fruits of his observations are set forth not only in his dispatches, but also in his *Diary* and private correspondence, which have been published; and though his specific statements on matters of fact are sometimes inaccurate, a good deal of value attaches to the picturesque impressions of his alert and nimble mind.

He represented, at seven-and-twenty, the intellectual aristocracy of the *ancien régime*. He also represented the gaiety, the gallantry—and even the sensibility—of his age and nation. Above all things, the Chevalier was *âme sensible*, and he was proud of it; but he was *âme sensible* in strict accordance with the manners and tone of good society. His friends opened their hearts to him, and he opened his to them—

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sometimes with a surprising candour. He was always in love, but generally in love with more than one woman at the same time. In France he had left her whom he speaks of as *La Préférée*—whom he would have married if he had not been too poor, and whom he still hoped to marry when fortune smiled on him. His letters are full of protestations that, though he roams through pleasures and palaces, he will never forget *La Préférée*, but will be faithful to her in his fashion. Only his fashion is—his fashion. It includes a great deal of roaming through palaces and pleasures, and permits of the life of the butterfly, flitting from flower to flower, and sipping sweets from each. The smiles of women, the Chevalier protests, are indispensable to his heart. Though they mean but little to him, he cannot do without them. So he begins with a gallant adventure in a hotel on his way to Russia, and proceeds to lay siege to the hearts of maids-of-honour—an attack the more exciting because he finds them carefully shielded from temptation on account of a recent scandalous affair between one of their number and one of his British colleagues.

It is nothing, he repeats. These affairs are not serious—he seeks no serious affairs. *La Préférée* always has, and always will have, the first place in his heart—other women only please him in so far as they remind him of her. And no doubt he meant what he said, but the

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time nevertheless came when he ceased to say it because he had ceased to mean it—because, in short, the inevitable had happened. The affair with “the little Narishkin” was only a flash in the pan. The affair with Princess Trubetskoi (aged nineteen) was not much more. One might make a list of other affairs and say the same about them. But when Normandez, the Spanish Minister, introduced him at the house of Behmer, the German merchant, the fate of his heart was sealed. Behmer had a daughter, Charlotte ; and the Chevalier had only seen her a few times when he was head-over-ears in love—and *pour le bon motif*. *La Préférée* was forgotten, and Charlotte’s praises were sung in letter after letter. “I have the good fortune,” the Chevalier wrote, “to be loved in the German style—that is to say, frankly, and without affectations.” So he gave up gallantry for sentiment, and courted Charlotte in the simple manner of any susceptible young man of the middle classes, and betrothed himself to her, and, after a long engagement, married her.

That is his story : and, of course, it does not really concern us ; but one glances at it, before quoting the Chevalier’s criticisms of the Court of Catherine the Great, because of the light which it throws upon his normal attitude towards the affairs of the heart. He was, we see, no cynic, but a man of sentiment, disposed to take all sincere affections seriously, but, at the same

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time, sufficiently a man of the world to be in no danger of mistaking a comedy for either a tragedy or an idyll. A friend who came to him with a tale of true love, whether returned or unreciprocated, was always sure of a sympathetic hearing ; but the spectacle of the proceedings at Catherine's Court impressed him merely as a comedy performed for his diversion. In some respects, he did her an injustice ; but, though there were some things which he did not understand,—the inwardness of Potemkin's evacuation of his office, for example,—he was, on the whole, an intelligent, as well as an amused, observer—

“ My friend, I have seen the new favourite, whose name is Zavadovski, the private secretary. He is better-looking than Potemkin ; and, as for the essentials of his post, he possesses them in an eminent degree. Still, though his talents were put to the test at Moscow, his preferment is not definitely decided upon. . . . I am inclined to think that Zavadovski will only gratify a passing fancy.”

So the Chevalier begins in February 1776. By April he has realised that the new favourite has, indeed, got his appointment, but that the appointment seems likely to carry less distinction than of old—

“ Orlof is regarded by Catherine as her faithful friend ; but, as he desires no other place

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in her heart, and as this sovereign cannot dispense with a lover, Zavadovski will take that position. They tell me, however, that he will have no authority—if the Empress can, in fact, withhold authority from the man who dominates her in that capacity.”

Then, a little later, comes the rumour that Zavadovski is to be asked to retire—

“ His successor is to be Besbrodof—a Ukrainian colonel—*d'une taille, d'une force, d'une vigueur!—Il mérite son poste.*”

That, however, was a false alarm. Zavadovski was still in favour in June, on the 19th of which month the Chevalier writes—

“ I hear that Zavadovski, who has been a sort of subordinate favourite of the Empress, has received from her Majesty 50,000 roubles, a pension of 5000 roubles, and 4000 peasants, in Ukrainia, where peasants are valuable. You will allow, my friend, that the *métier* is a profitable one in this part of the world.”

And then Zavadovski is bowed out, and Zoritch is bowed in—

“ This favourite (Potemkin), who is in a stronger position than ever, and plays here the part which the Pompadour played towards the end of the life of Louis xv., has introduced a certain Zoritch, who has been promoted

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lieutenant-general and Inspector of Light Infantry. I am told that he has been given 1800 peasants for his *coup d'essai*."

Zoritch, however, has no history beyond the fact that he pocketed 1,420,000 roubles and was succeeded by Korsakof ; and Korsakof, in his turn, has very little history beyond the fact that he pocketed 920,000 roubles, and was succeeded by Lanskoi.

He was quite a common man,—a sergeant in a regiment of hussars,—picked out, of course, by Potemkin, who held that, the lower the lover's degree, the less likely was he to thwart his own ambitions. His real name was Korsak ; but his protectors lengthened it to Korsakof, on the assumption that the extended appellative had a nobler ring, and would seem worthier of imperial gifts and favours. The one thing quite certain about him is that, while he was handsome enough to please Catherine, he was also fool enough to please Potemkin : "the very type of a noodle," writes the Chevalier—"a noodle of the most degraded kind, such as we should not tolerate in France." It is also recorded that he had a tenor voice—a wonderful instrument of music—and that Catherine tried to educate him.

She had previously tried to educate Zoritch,—not altogether without success,—lecturing to him as they paced the Palace gardens, and finding him an attentive, if not a particularly able,

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scholar. The Chevalier tells us that she boasted of his aptitude for learning ; and Zoritch himself, in after years, when he had retired, to live on his savings in his country seat, confided to his friends that he had been a boor before his good lady—*sa dame*—took him in hand, but that she had formed him, and made him the polished gentleman that he was. Korsakof, however, was less intelligently receptive, as a well-known anecdote attests. Catherine one day sent him a number of books, together with a command to read them. He did not read them, but he drew the inference that her estimate of a man's worth depended upon the size of his library, and decided to acquire a library. “I want some books,” he said to the tradesman ; and the bookseller inquired what books he wanted. “I want,” he explained, “some large books for the lower shelves, and some small books for the upper ones. These are the measurements.” The bookseller bowed, awaiting more precise instructions ; and Korsakof looked round the shop, and observed that certain shelves were filled with volumes all of the same size and appearance. “Ah yes !” he said : “here are some books that will do ;” and he never knew, until a friend pointed the fact out to him, that he had purchased several hundred copies of a single work.

Korsakof's dismissal, however, was due, not to his indifference to literature, but to his revolt against the restrictions of the gilded

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cage. He tempted Catherine's confidante, the Countess Bruce, and she fell; or perhaps (for there is no certainty in the matter) it was she who tempted him. It is said to have been Potemkin who provided them with facilities for transcending the limitations of the cage; and he is said also to have contrived that they should be caught transcending them. His motives can only be guessed at; the best accredited is that he merely wished to make a fresh appointment in order to draw a fresh commission for his services as an intermediary. Caught, at all events, the offenders were—by Catherine herself—behind a door which was left ajar at a time when it ought to have been locked; and the consequence was that Kor-sakof went the way that Zoritch had gone before him. It is said that he and Zoritch used, in after years, to play cards together, and compare notes as to their experiences, which had certainly been very similar.

Our authority for the statement is Sir Joseph Harris, afterwards first Earl of Malmesbury, then British Ambassador at St. Peters-burg. He was not such an amused spectator as the Chevalier, but took the high moral tone of a man compelled by circumstances to associate with persons whom he would not spontaneously have touched even with a pair of tongs. Still, in the grave style of a diplomat who discharges a painful duty, he told his Government what he thought his Government ought to

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know; and he took the view that his Government ought to be kept *au courant* with all the scandals of the day. It is from him, for instance, that we learn that Zoritch retired from his office with threats of violence, and that there was more than one candidate for the succession—

“The Lieutenant of Police of Moscow, Mons. Acharoff, is a middle-aged man, well made, though with more of the Hercules than the Apollo. There is, I understand, a Persian candidate in case of M. de Zoritch’s resignation, but I cannot speak of his figure, as I am not personally acquainted with him. Zoritch is prepared for his dismissal, but I am told he is prepared to call his successor to an account. *Je sais bien que je dois sauter, mais par Dieu je couperai les oreilles à celui qui prend ma place,* were his words, in talking the other day on this subject.”

And then, when the hour of dismissal is becoming more imminent—

“A few days ago, Prince Potemkin, displeased with Zoritch, presented to the Empress, as she was going to the play, a tall hussar officer, one of his adjutants. She distinguished him a good deal. Zoritch was present. As soon as Her Imperial Majesty was gone, he fell upon Potemkin in a very violent manner, made use of the strongest expressions of abuse, and insisted on his fighting him. Potemkin declined

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this offer, and behaved on the occasion as a person not undeserving the invectives bestowed upon him. The play being ended, Zoritch followed the Empress into her apartment, flung himself at her feet, and confessed what he had done ; saying that, notwithstanding the honours and riches she had heaped upon him, he was indifferent to everything but her favour and good graces. . . . Potemkin is determined to have him dismissed, and Zoritch is determined to cut the throat of his successor. Judge of the tenour of the whole Court from this anecdote.”

And then, when the successor was at last appointed—

“ Zoritch, a few days ago, received his final dismissal. It was conveyed to him by the Empress herself in very gentle terms, but received by him in a very different manner. Forgetting to whom he was speaking, he was very bitter in his reproaches ; painted this mutable conduct in the strongest colours, and foretold the most fatal consequences from it. . . . Zoritch, with an increase of pension, an immense sum of ready money, and an addition of seven thousand peasants to his estates, is going to travel. His successor, by name Korsak, will not be declared till this journey takes place ; the impetuosity of Zoritch’s character making it not safe for any man to take publicly this office upon him while he remains in the country.

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Both Court and town are occupied with this event alone, and I am sorry to say it gives rise to many unpleasant reflections, and sinks in the eyes of foreigners the reputation of the Empress and the consideration of the Empire."

Then, before Korsakof had been long established in his post—

"The new favourite is very much on his decline. There are several competitors for his employment: some supported by Prince Potemkin; some by Prince Orlof and Count Panin . . . but she seems strongly disposed to choose for herself. . . . The fate of these young gentlemen still remains undecided, though it appears settled that Korsakof should be sent to Spa for his health. As the small remains of decency kept up when I first came have totally disappeared, I should not be surprised if, instead of one favourite, we should see several: and that the effects should by that means hasten the evils which even otherwise must inevitably fall on the Empire."

And then, early in 1779—

"The favourite of the day, who wears all the insignia and has the public honour of that office, is still the same Korsak; he is very good-natured, but silly to a degree, and entirely subservient to the orders of Prince Potemkin and the Countess Bruce. These two seem now

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in quiet possession of the Empress's mind. He is supreme in regard to everything that regards her serious or pleasurable pursuits ; the other interferes only in the latter."

In what fashion the Countess presumed to interfere with the Empress's "pleasurable pursuits" we have already seen. The consequences of the interference are noted by the Ambassador thus—

"Korsak received his dismission from the mouth of the Empress herself yesterday morning ; and, a few hours afterwards, General Betzkoy was ordered to assure him of the Empress's intention of providing munificently for him, but that she wished he would either travel or marry. His successor is called Lanskoi, of the district of Smolensko ; he was one of the Chevalier Guards, and since Peterhof has been the object of Her Imperial Majesty's attention. Potemkin, however, having another person in view, contrived to prevent his nomination till now, when he was induced to consent to it by a present of not less than 900,000 roubles in land and money on his birthday."

It was Potemkin's third commission, drawn as agent for the affairs of Catherine's heart ; but, though heavier than the two preceding ones, was well worth paying, for the number of roubles which Lanskoi pocketed was no less than 7,260,000.

CHAPTER XXII

Further Favourites—The Reign of Lanskoi—His Death—
The Reign of Yermolof

THE story commonly told of the rise of Lanskoi is that General Tolstoy, when received in audience, drew Catherine's attention to him. "Your Imperial Majesty has a handsome young fellow doing sentry-go in the anteroom," he presumed to say; and Catherine went out to inspect the sentry for herself, and was so favourably impressed that she at once invited him into the gilded cage.

Wealth beyond the dreams of avarice—a fortune, to be precise, of 7,260,000 roubles—was in store for him; but, at the hour of his promotion, five shirts constituted the sum total of his earthly possessions. It is related that, one night, having no money in his pocket, he appealed for a night's lodging to a professor of French with whom he was acquainted, and that the professor gave him a shakedown on the floor, while he himself went to bed. It is further related that, when he had attained to prosperity, he invited the professor, in his turn, to dine and spend the night, saying to him

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genially, when the hour grew late, “Bedtime at last, my friend ; but now it is my turn to sleep between the sheets, and yours to make yourself as comfortable as you can on the bare boards.” It is a graphic picture of the way in which Fortune’s wheel just then revolved at Catherine’s Court. We have already seen how heavily Potemkin taxed the revolution.

The little that there is to be said about Lanskoi may be summed up in a few sentences. Catherine tried to educate him, as she had tried to educate her other favourites, but not much more successfully. “She has spent,” writes the Chevalier de Corberon, “ten thousand roubles in buying him a library of books which he assuredly will never read.” He adds that she exhorted him to read Cicero’s *Letters*, with a view of qualifying himself for the conduct of the affairs of State ; and he proceeds to the generalisation—

“This woman’s illusions with regard to her favourites—illusions perpetually dispelled and then as frequently renewed, as her innumerable weaknesses succeed one another—are really terrible. She has high ideals and the best intentions, but her morals corrupt the country and her extravagance ruins it ; she will end with the reputation of a weakly sentimental woman.”

For the rest, Lanskoi was twenty-two years of age, had a mob of troublesome poor relations,

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and was too fond of punch—a special punch of his own invention, compounded of tokay, rum, and the juice of pine-apples; but at least he was a contented favourite, and showed no desire to leave the nest when he had feathered it. He occupied it for four years, and only vacated it by death; though rumours that his ejection was contemplated gained credence from time to time, and are repeated by both the Chevalier and Harris. His successor, according to the former, was to be a certain Captain Pajacksi—"a young man of the build of a Hercules, of whom nothing else is at present known." Harris, on the contrary, mentions a certain Redinnof, adding the explanation which his intimacy with Potemkin enables him to give—

"Lanskoi has conducted himself in so unexceptionable a manner as not to afford the smallest pretext for dismissing him. He is neither jealous, inconstant, nor impertinent, and laments the disgrace he foresees impending in so pathetic a manner that he puzzles both his sovereign and her confidants how to get rid of him without appearing harsh. The successor, however, presses hard upon him, and compassion will soon give way to a stronger feeling. I understand my friend proposes to make use of the unbounded power these moments will give him, in obtaining no less than 700,000 roubles for himself."

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Potemkin, that is to say, thought that it was time for him to draw yet another commission ; and it is difficult to find anything beyond this passion for a percentage at the bottom of the intrigues for Lanskoi's discomfiture. Catherine's own feelings must be judged from the fact that she retained Lanskoi, and endowed him more richly than any of the others. She was nearly thirty years his senior, so that there may have been a maternal element in her affection, though it can hardly have been the predominant feeling. His death is attributed to a complication of scarlet fever and *angina pectoris*—aggravated, according to his German physician, by the exhausting effects of aphrodisiac drugs. Perhaps the punch compounded of tokay, rum, and the juice of pine-apples had also played its part in undermining his constitution ; but it is seldom possible to make head or tail of the diagnoses of eighteenth-century physicians. What is indisputable is the intensity of Catherine's distress. She neglected her imperial duties in order to lock herself up and cry with Lanskoi's sister ; and there were those among her courtiers who expected her to die of her grief. Her lamentations, in her letters to Grimm, were loud—

“ Public affairs,” she wrote, “ are getting on all right ; but I myself, who was so happy, have no happiness any longer. I cry, and I write, and that is all that I can do. If you

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want to know the truth about me, I can only tell you that, for three months, I have been inconsolable for my irreparable loss. I am now getting used, once more, to the sight of human faces ; but my heart still bleeds as it did at the first instant of my loss. I do my duty, and try to do it well ; but my sorrow is such as I have never felt before, and for three months I have been in the most terrible state, suffering the tortures of the damned."

Other letters, to other correspondents, are couched in the same tone. There is no mistaking the note of sincerity which sounds in them ; and of course it is a mistake (albeit a common one) to suppose that the mutable are never sincere. Catherine might be "weakly sentimental," as M. de Corberon declared, but she could also be genuinely sentimental at her hour. We may assume that the loneliness of her exalted position oppressed her, much as the sense of his dignified isolation is said sometimes to weigh upon the mind of the captain of a man-of-war. By upbringing, if not by birth, she was a German *bourgeoise*—and these are pre-eminently sentimental. Those who should have been her equals were now her inferiors. Her actual equals in rank she only met occasionally, and only on ceremonial terms. Sincerity and simplicity were only possible to her within the confines of the gilded cage, where she could hope that a

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young man who owed everything to her would love her for herself alone.

Not all of them had done so—indeed hardly any of them had done so. The best of them, visibly embarrassed by their promotion, had quickly bored her. Others had exploited her, and then made her ridiculous by their familiarities, or their infidelities, or both. Empress though she was, and imperially beautiful, she had known jealousy and neglect, just like any rich tradesman's daughter who buys a noble husband with her father's fortune. If all the stories are true, she had even known what it was to be knocked about when she objected. Moreover, marriage with an equal was out of the question for her—the dark stories of the death of her first husband barred the way to that ; and she was a woman who felt that it was not good for her to live alone ; and, being an Empress, albeit an Empress getting on in years, she had only to lift her finger and beckon, in order to replace a lover who had tired or displeased her. She could have lovers, in short, as easily as an Emperor could have mistresses, and had as little need to resist the temptations of novelty. Because she yielded to those temptations, and made no mystery about it, she has been compared to Louis xv. ; but she differed from the Well-Beloved in an essential point.

She needed sentiment—not always, but from time to time. She needed—also from time

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to time—the illusion of those things to the reality of which it was impossible for her to attain. Lanskoi gave her that illusion, as none of her other lovers, since her separation from Poniatowski, had given it. Consequently, she valued and cherished him as she had valued and cherished none of them. It did not matter to her that he was expensive—for the benefactions of an Autocrat are only a matter of robbing Peter to endow Paul ; and she forgave him for his addiction to rum punch—though she herself only drank weak wine and water ; and when he died, she really felt as if his death had overclouded her sentimental life for ever, and she would never (being now fifty-five) have the heart to love again.

Yet she wanted to love again ; for, if she had been in love with her lover, she was also in love with love itself. And a woman who is anxious to love again at fifty-five knows that she has little time to lose, and is therefore responsive to appeals to conquer her sorrow and make an effort ; and, in the case of an Empress, such appeals are not likely to be lacking. They were not wanting in Catherine's case ; and at last, after the lapse of ten months, she responded to them. Grimm, as usual, was the correspondent in whom she confided—

“ My heart,” she wrote to him, “ is once more calm and serene, for, with the help of my friends, I have made an effort and roused

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myself. We began with a comedy, which they say was charming—there is your proof that I am once more gay and animated. The period of monosyllables is past, and I cannot complain of the lack of friends whose attachment and attentions distract and relieve me, though I needed time to recover the taste for such things, and still more time to recover the habit of them. Which means—to put it in one word instead of a hundred—that I have found a new friend, capable of winning my friendship, and very worthy of it."

Just so ; and Potemkin had played his usual part in the transaction. He had submitted, it is said, two candidates—Yermolof and Mamonef ; and Catherine, while favourably impressed by both of them, gave her preference to the former. Castera tells us that the young Prince Dashkof also proposed himself as what, in the electoral world, is called an " independent candidate," but was deceived, tricked, and defeated by Potemkin's cunning. His mother, in her *Memoirs*, treats the calumny with silent contempt ; and it may very well be no more than a calumny. The man, at any rate, who actually caught Catherine's heart on the rebound was the aforesaid Yermolof.

He was a subaltern in the foot-guards. His tenancy of the gilded cage was brief ; and little is recorded of him either for good or evil. Catherine accepted him without enthusiasm,

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in the spirit of the bride who prefers a *mariage de convenance* to the indignity of perpetual spinsterhood—or perhaps one should say in the spirit of the man of the world who takes a mistress, not because he is infatuated, but because he has convinced himself that such companionship will relieve his boredom. He was eligible, but he did not touch her heart ; and his failure to do so is reflected in the fact that the shower of roubles rained on him was, in comparison with some of the previous showers, the merest drizzle. The number of roubles which fell to his share was only 550,000.

No doubt the lukewarmness of Catherine's attachment was the principal reason why his reign was brief ; but there were other reasons also. He waxed arrogant, crossed Potemkin's path, and got in Potemkin's way—a challenge to a trial of strength which Potemkin was not slow to take up. Yermolof had an uncle who had had a deadly quarrel with Potemkin at the card-table ; he espoused his cause. He also espoused the cause of a certain ex-Khan of the Crimea, whose pension he accused Potemkin of misappropriating ; and he succeeded in causing a temporary coolness between Catherine and her powerful adviser. But his illusion of triumph was shortlived. As soon as Potemkin realised the new situation, he came to Catherine's boudoir, frowning, threatening, and thundering. She must choose, he said, between Yermolof and himself—and she must choose at once.

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“So long,” he said, “as you keep that white negro,¹ I shall not set my foot inside the Palace.”

Catherine, being accustomed to be ordered about by him, submitted. It seems that she was too indifferent to Yermolof even to resist. She wanted a favourite; but whether the favourite was Yermolof or another did not matter. Perhaps her indifference was her fashion of showing her fidelity to the memory of Lanskoi. However that may be, she sent Yermolof an instant and urgent order to travel for the benefit of his health, writing the order while Potemkin stood over her and practically dictated it. Yermolof, receiving the order, pleaded that he might at least be permitted to see his Empress once more in order to say farewell to her; but Potemkin would not have it. He proposed to strike while the iron was hot, and to take no risk of what might happen when the iron was cold. He told Catherine that he declined to leave her presence until Yermolof had left the Palace; and Catherine, knowing him for a man of his word, did as he insisted. Then he rushed off and told the French Ambassador, M. de Ségur, what had happened.

M. de Ségur had been as anxious as Potemkin to see the favourite deposed. He had contrived to bring Potemkin over to the French interest—most likely by corrupt means which we need not stop to investigate. Yermolof’s influence, such as it was, had been thrown into the opposite

¹ He so called Yermolof on account of his extreme pallor.

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scale ; and M. de Ségur, who did not know his Potemkin, had expected to see Potemkin discomfited and Yermolof triumphant. So now, as we gather from M. de Ségur's *Mémoires*, Potemkin sang his pæan—

“ As soon as I met the Prince, he threw himself into my arms, exclaiming, ‘ Well, my friend, did I mislead you ? Has that boy bowled me over ? Have I been destroyed by my audacity ? Not a bit of it. For once, Mr. Diplomat, you will have to admit that, in these political matters, my predictions are more to be relied upon than yours.’ ”

And M. de Ségur echoed the pæan, in suitable language, in a dispatch to the French Foreign Office, openly rejoicing in the overthrow of an upstart who had, he said, honoured him with his personal dislike, and “ used the most indecent language whenever the name of France was mentioned.” Whence we may infer that even in the eyes of the *corps diplomatique* the office of favourite had come to be regarded as a post in the Civil Service, though not of the permanent Civil Service—a proper subject of jobbery and intrigue, to be conducted without superfluous consideration for the preferences of Catherine’s own heart.

And so, Yermolof having gone the way of all favourites,—expelled almost as suddenly as the mistress to whom Sainte-Beuve, after he had

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locked her out, threw down her clothes and other belongings from her bedroom window,—with a comparatively modest number of roubles in his pocket, Potemkin's other nominee, Mamonoф, was ushered into the gilded cage in his stead.

CHAPTER XXIII

The Accession of Mamonof

THE reign of Mamonof is hardly to be called a reign, though it lasted longer than that of his predecessor. Measured strictly in roubles, its glory was less than that of his predecessor. Yermolof, in a year, accumulated 550,000 roubles ; Mamonof no more than 880,000 roubles in four years. Moreover, Yermolof did at least attempt to meddle with matters classed as too high for him ; whereas Mamonof was afraid to meddle. One gets his measure, in that respect, in two stories told by the Comte de Ségur, who was well disposed towards him because he, on his part, was well disposed towards France and the French influence.

M. de Ségur's great difficulty was to get past Catherine's ministers,—in particular, to get past Potemkin, who was no longer as friendly as he had been,—and gain the Empress's own ear for certain proposals which he was charged to make. To that end he wrote to Mamonof, appealing to him to use his influence ; and Mamonof hastened to reply that

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he had none, being strictly forbidden to interpose in political questions. But M. de Ségur, who was a very clever diplomatist, had been well aware of that when he wrote. Mamonof, he had calculated, would run to the Empress with the letter and the draft of his own answer, in order to show how strictly he desired to confine himself to his decorative functions—Catherine would thus indirectly learn the facts which he suspected Potemkin of withholding from her. She did so, and the Ambassador gained his point, showing great address in using the favourite in the only way in which this particular favourite could be used. Then, in order to show his gratitude, he invited the favourite to dinner; and the invitation brings us to the second anecdote.

Mamonof, M. de Ségur tells us, was not allowed outside the gates of the Imperial Palace without permission, but had to apply for an *excuse*, like a modern undergraduate who desires to run up to town to attend a funeral. The favour of the *excuse* was granted, as an act of courtesy to the Ambassador, but the duration of the leave of absence was strictly limited; and Catherine took steps to see that it was not exceeded. She came, in the course of the evening, to the Ambassador's door to fetch her favourite, as a nurse fetches a child. Her carriage was seen from the window, slowly driving to and fro; she herself was seen, looking up, waiting, watching, and making sure.

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The stories are significant, and the impression derived from them is confirmed by a passage quoted by M. Waliszewski from Langeron's unpublished *Memoirs*—

“ Some of the favourites,” Langeron writes, “ contrived to distinguish and dignify their degraded functions : Potemkin by making himself, to all intents and purposes, an Emperor ; Zavadovski by making himself generally useful in the civil administration of the Empire ; Mamonof by making it clear to every one that he felt thoroughly ashamed of himself.”

One may surmise that a young man of six-and-twenty generally does feel ashamed of himself when he not only consents to be the lover of a woman of fifty-eight, but is publicly exploited as such ; and Catherine, as we know, did not hide the affections of her heart under a bushel. On this occasion, she caused Mamonof's portrait, together with her own, to be hung as an ornament in every room of her pleasaunce, the Hermitage, to the respectful amazement of her guests, and even allowed engraved copies of the portraits to be sold as pendants in the St. Petersburg shops. Moreover, in the course of her famous journey to the Crimea, to which we shall presently come, Mamonof's bed, placed side by side with her own, was an object of admiration which sundry of the companions of her progress were privileged to inspect.

If the lover had been, like some of the lovers,



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a promoted non-commissioned officer, he might not have minded. He might, in that case, even have been proud, believing his elevation to be the subject of envy as well as remark. But Mamonof was by way of being a gentleman—a man of refinement and culture, if not of character. Those who met him say that he talked well—and in several languages. He was “quite witty,” says Sacken of Saxony; and he was clever enough to write trifles for amateur theatrical performances—poor stuff, indeed, but not absolutely beneath contempt. Moreover, he was of good family, related in some way to the illustrious Russian House of Rurik. One can understand that such a man “felt his position,” even though he did not display any great haste to retire from it—even though the Emperor of Austria gave him a gold watch and made him, not indeed a Prince, but at any rate a Count, of the Holy Roman Empire. He looked ahead, no doubt, as most men do who perform uncongenial tasks, to the time when he would be free to follow his inclinations, and live his life in his own way; but, in the meanwhile, he unblushingly and unshamefacedly added field to field, rouble to rouble, serf to serf.

Catherine meant to be charming to him—a mother as well as a mistress. She loved most of her later lovers in that spirit, and had a retort ready for anyone who reproached her for preferring lovers of such tender years. “I

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am rendering a great service to the Empire," she said, " in forming the characters of so many gifted young men ; " and there was no denying that she could cite a sufficient number of instances to make out a case. Zavadovski, after loving her, had become a very competent official. Zoritch, the ex-major of hussars, was inspired, after loving her, to found at his own cost the first Russian Military Academy. The case of Potemkin—though he, doubtless, taught more than he learnt—has been before us ; and there is the case of Zubof still to come. Decidedly Catherine could claim that to love her was a liberal education, in the sense that her lovers were also her pupils, and that a fair proportion of the pupils passed into the Civil Service, and proved themselves competent functionaries. No doubt it might have been with Mamonof as with the others, if he had been that sort of man. But he was not. He " felt his position " ; he wondered what people thought of him ; he was afraid of being laughed at ; he was ashamed, and therefore powerless to exploit the favours which oppressed him. One thinks of him, far more than of any of the other favourites, as a toy, a pet, a lap-dog.

" Red coat " was Catherine's nickname for him ; and this is her report of him to the ever-inquisitive Grimm—

" The red coat envelops a person whose heart is excellent, and whose honesty is great.

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He has wit enough for four, an inexhaustible stock of gaiety, much originality in his views of life and his ways of expressing himself, an admirable education which qualifies him to shine. He hides his love of poetry as if it were a crime ; he is passionately fond of music ; he takes in ideas with rare facility. God knows what he hasn't learnt by heart. He recites ; he gossips ; he has the manners and tone of good society ; his politeness is something wonderful ; he writes both Russian and French far better than most Russians. His appearance is in perfect harmony with his intelligence. His features are very regular ; he has beautiful black eyes and equally beautiful eyelashes. He is a little above medium height ; his air is noble, and his manners are easy and natural. If you were to meet this Red Coat, I am sure you would ask his name if you did not already know it."

To Potemkin, again, Catherine wrote of Mamonof as "invaluable" ; and Potemkin was not jealous. One may reasonably infer that Potemkin knew his man, had taken the measure of his value, and apprehended no rivalry from him in his own sphere of influence—having, in fact, pushed his fortunes in this quarter precisely because he was colourless and without ambition. Potemkin's attitude, in short, like M. de Ségur's, stamps Mamonof as an amiable nonentity ; though the world in general might

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never have realised his limitations if Catherine had not taken him with her, as she might have taken a lap-dog, in her famous progress through her dominions to the Crimea, and so exposed him to critical eyes.

The idea of that journey, of course, was not his. He much preferred a quiet life ; he had not the least desire to make a show of himself ; and if he ever had any ideas on matters of high policy, he never ventured to propound them. Yermolof, however, had thrown out the suggestion ; Potemkin had taken it up ; and Catherine had fallen in with it. Information had reached Yermolof that Potemkin was making a mess of things in the territories lately taken from the Turks ; and he hoped that if Catherine saw the mess, Potemkin would be discredited. Potemkin, however, was not in the least afraid. The journey, he knew, would not be stage-managed by Yermolof, but by him ; and he trusted his own genius for stage-management. Catherine would only see what he chose to show her, and he would only show her what she would be pleased to see. Provisional cities should spring up wherever she desired to find them, like mushrooms, in a night—even if they disappeared again as soon as she had passed ; and if their provisional inhabitants did not look prosperous and contented, he would know the reason why. So, instead of opposing Yermolof's proposal, he merely postponed it until he had had time to arrange the *mise-en-scène* ; and

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then, after Yermolof had fallen from his high estate, he revived it and pressed it as the happiest of happy thoughts.

And Catherine was delighted. The scheme appealed to her as such dramatic conceptions always did. She had no idea that the stage was to be set so as to deceive her ; but she liked the idea of a stage, and herself as the central figure on it ; and the more she looked at it the better it pleased her. It was a chance of impressing Europe far more effectively than she had impressed it by her gesticulations from the westward window of her Palace on the Neva. Having resolved to give the performance, she further determined that it should be no hole-and-corner affair, but should be given in a magnificent style worthy of Potemkin's magnificent stage-management, in the presence of guests whose attendance would be a guarantee against the perishing of its fame for lack of chroniclers. The Ambassadors were the best descriptive reporters of those days ; so she would invite M. de Ségur and Mr. FitzHerbert. The Prince de Ligne of the Austrian Netherlands should also be of the party. Her old friend Poniatowski—now Stanislas Augustus, King of a partly partitioned Poland—and Joseph II. of Austria, should be invited to visit her at one of her halting-places. It should be such a progress, in short, as the world did not remember to have seen before, and hardly expected to see again.

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And of course she would take Mamonof with her—much as she might have taken a spaniel or a lap-dog ; partly because she liked him, and partly because she considered herself too great to need to make a secret of her partialities

CHAPTER XXIV

Catherine's Journey to her Crimean Dominions

THE original design of Catherine's progress to the Crimea was even more impressive than its execution. Report and intention anticipated still greater glories than were realised. The splendours of the Field of the Cloth of Gold, if not of the Durbar, pale into insignificance beside the plan. There were to be triumphal arches, through which the Empress was to pass in a triumphal car, with a wreath of laurel on her head. An immense army—six regiments of cavalry and twenty-two of infantry—was to escort her wherever she went. She was to be crowned Queen of the Crimea ; and no less than six archbishops, supported by a vast concourse of the inferior clergy, were to superintend her ceremonial devotions. Seven million roubles were to be distributed in gifts ; and Catherine's younger grandson, Constantine, was to be conducted to the gates of the Ottoman dominions, and shown to the Ottoman people as the Prince destined to set the coping-stone on the policy of Peter the Great, and reign over the Moslems at the Golden Horn.

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But that was not to be. The Grand Duke Constantine fell sick of the measles, and had to be left at home. The rumour was spread that the purpose of the military promenade was to trample conquered peoples in the dust. It was not certain that all the subjected tribes would prove subservient. There was a danger that some of them might be frightened into hostility. In view of that risk, the plan of the progress was modified ; but, even so, it was designed on a scale of magnificent grandeur. Not only the people but also the chroniclers were impressed. The chief of them was M. de Ségur, who, courtier though he was, had all the gifts of a good special correspondent, including a keen eye for picturesque and humorous detail ; and where he fails us, we have the lively notes of the Prince de Ligne—fifty years old, but still as merry as a boy, and as audacious a flatterer as ever paid a lady the compliments which ladies enjoy. And so the progress began on 18th January 1787, in circumstances which inspired M. de Ségur to eloquent exclamations concerning “ the spring-time of life, when anxiety leaves neither traces on the heart nor wrinkles on the brow.” Here is his first picture—

“ The Empress took with her in her carriage Mlle Protassof¹ and Count Mamonof, who never left her side, Count Cobentzel, the Grand

¹ A lady who had succeeded Countess Bruce in the rôle of confidante.

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Equerry Narishkin, and the Grand Chamberlain Schouvalof. I myself rode in the second carriage, with FitzHerbert, Count Czernichef, and the Count of Anhalt. The procession consisted of 14 carriages, 124 sledges, and 40 supplementary vehicles. At every post station 560 horses were waiting for us. The days, at that season of the year, were short. The sun, rising late, disappeared again after six or seven hours, and the nights were terribly black ; but the darkness was scattered by methods of truly Oriental magnificence. On both sides of the road, at brief intervals, there were blazing bonfires of pine, and larch, and cypress ; so that our track was a path of fire more brilliant than the daylight.”

Then follows an account of Catherine’s daily programme of duty and diversion—

“ She rose at six, and set to work with her ministers. Then she breakfasted, and held a levée. We started at nine, and stopped for dinner at two. Then we got into the carriages again, and drove on until seven. Wherever she arrived, she found a palace, or at any rate a great country house, prepared for her reception ; and we dined with her every day. After devoting a few minutes to her toilet, Her Majesty joined us in the drawing-room, and chatted or played cards until nine, when she withdrew, and worked again until eleven.”

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Her talk, as she jolted over the roads, was largely of her Empire. She spoke of its grandeur with a pretty modesty, calling it *mon petit ménage*—drawing the attention of her companions to the fact that it was gradually “growing larger and getting filled up.” She supposed, she said, that the grand ladies of Paris were full of pity for them, because they were condemned to travel “with a tiresome old Empress in a country of barbarians and bears.” She told stories of eminent Frenchmen who, in the days when she first flashed her signals to the West, had assumed that she was a barbarian, and behaved accordingly: the story, for instance, of Mercier de la Rivière, once a French functionary in Martinique, whom she had invited to Russia because she had been interested by his treatise on Political Economy.

Arriving at Moscow at a time when the Empress was detained elsewhere, that philosopher thought it would be a good idea if he were to make himself useful by re-organising the Russian Civil Service. He therefore bought three adjoining houses, knocked them into one, transformed the reception rooms into antechambers and the bedrooms into offices, and painted on the various doors: *Department of Trade*; *Department of Justice*; *Department of Finance*, etc. etc. Catherine discovered the comedy in progress, stopped it, and sent the comedian about his business. “M. de la Rivière,” she commented, “was under

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the impression that we walked on all fours ; and he had been kind enough to come all the way from the West Indies for the purpose of setting us on our hind legs ; ” a piquant reminiscence to revive now that the glories of the great Empire were apparent even to the least observant eye.

And so to Kief, where a halt was called until the ice of the Dnieper melted, and the progress could be continued by water—a halt during which the Ambassadors were more than ever amazed by the munificence of Catherine’s hospitality. They had come prepared to lodge and board themselves at their own cost ; but they found everything provided—

“ An elegant villa residence was assigned to me ; and I found it equipped with everything that I could require. The Empress had supplied me with a butler, valets, footmen, cooks, coachmen, carriages, postilions, costly plate, the finest table linen, porcelain, and the choicest wines—everything, in short, that was necessary to the maintenance of a *stylish* household. She had strictly forbidden her people to allow us to pay for anything whatsoever ; and from the beginning to the end of our journey, we had absolutely no expenses, except for the presents which we thought it right to offer to the owners of the houses allotted to us.”

Potemkin, the stage-manager of the display, joined the party at Kief, but kept himself in the background as a good stage-manager should.

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His headquarters were in a neighbouring monastery, where he sprawled on a sofa in his dressing-gown and slippers, with a dirty face and a tumbled head of hair, curt and brusque in his manner, apparently absorbed in playing chess with one of his subordinates, but nevertheless, somehow or other, getting his work done, and conjuring up effective spectacles as required —pageants of Empire such as no other State in Europe could have furnished. The miscellaneous subjects of the Empress defiled, or manœuvred, before her at his bidding ; and the Prince de Ligne described his impressions, with a sparkling pen, in a letter to his Parisian friend, Mme de Coigny—

“ Ah ! good heavens ! what a scene before me ! What a hurly-burly ! What diamonds, gold, stars, and *cordons* ! What chains, ribbons, turbans ! What scarlet caps, either furred or pointed ! . . . Louis xiv. would have been jealous of his sister, or he would have married her, in order to have such a splendid circle about him. The sons of the King of the Caucasus, of Heraclius, for instance, who are here, would give him more satisfaction than his five or six old knights of St. Louis. Twenty archbishops (a trifle unclean), with beards flowing to their knees, are far more picturesque than the king’s chaplains in their little neckbands. The escort of cavalry, attending a Polish nobleman, has more of an air than his mounted police

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in their short jackets, preceding the melancholy coach, with its six sorry nags, of an official in a flat collar and big wig ; and their glittering sabres with jewelled hilts are much more imposing than the white wands of the great officers of the King of England. . . . They have just come to see fireworks which, they say, have cost 40,000 roubles.”

Such was the pageant—though Kief only saw the beginning of it ; and, in addition, there were balls, banquets, and concerts, once or twice a week ; but, in the intervals between the formal entertainments, Catherine unbent with the ease and charm which made her so many friends during her life and still conciliate even those students of her career who shake their heads in disapprobation of her proceedings. She lived, in these days, with her chosen intimates and the Ambassadors, much as the mistress of a great country house lives with guests who are her equals. Eight or ten of them dined at her table daily, and spent the evening with her afterwards, untroubled by any embarrassing restraints of etiquette. “The Empress,” writes M. de Ségar, “disappeared, and we only saw a charming hostess. We told each other stories, we talked literature, we played billiards.” She appealed to him as a poet, he tells us, to teach her to write poetry too ; but though he tried for a whole week, she made no perceptible progress ; and the

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British Ambassador, who had a dry wit of his own, tried to console her for her failure—

“ Ah ! madam,” he said, “ one cannot achieve all kinds of glory simultaneously. In the matter of poetry, you would have done well to rest contented with the renown won by the beautiful lines which you composed as an epitaph for your pet dog—

‘Here lies the Duchess Anderson,
Who bit the Dr. Rogerson.’ ”

That was one of the jests of the gay journey ; and another was afforded by the merry humour of the Prince de Ligne, who, in spite of his fifty years, was the life and soul of the party.

Among his other accomplishments, the Prince was an amateur doctor ; and in that capacity he persuaded Cobentzel, the Austrian Ambassador, to be bled for a sore throat, and M. de Ségur to take a purgative to counteract a fever. He himself was also suffering at the time from some trivial ailment, but left the cure to nature ; and, a few days later, the Empress inquired after his health. He replied that he was well ; but Catherine pressed him on the subject. “ I certainly understood that you were indisposed,” she said. “ Has the doctor cured you ? ” “ No, madam ; I treated myself after a fashion of my own.” “ What fashion was that ? ” “ I applied leeches to Cobentzel, madam, and I gave Ségur a black draught ; and now I am myself again.”

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So they trifled ; and one observes that, in all the trifling, there was no question of Mamonof. He was there all the time, just as a spaniel or a lap-dog might have been. There was no more mystery about him than there would have been about such a pet—no more mystery about his sleeping-place than there would have been about a spaniel's kennel. Catherine imposed him on the company, and the company accepted him ; but he cut no sort of a figure in it. He was amiable, but of no more account than a barber's block—a dull dog among brilliant talkers ; overwhelmed by his patron Potemkin, and out-classed by the wits ; feeling his position painfully, as we have already pointed out. But now, at last, the Dnieper ice was breaking up, and the journey could be continued by water ; the fleet being “the most imposing ever seen upon a river.”

“ It comprised more than eighty vessels—the crews and passengers numbering three thousand men. At the head of the procession floated seven galleys of immense size and elegant design, artistically painted, and manned by nimble sailors in gay uniforms ; the deck-cabins richly adorned with gold and silk.

“ On the galley immediately following that of the Empress were MM. de Cobentzel and FitzHerbert. I myself shared the second with the Prince de Ligne. The others were assigned to Prince Potemkin, his nieces, the Grand

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Chamberlain, the Grand Equerry, the Ministers, and the other great personages whom Catherine had honoured with invitations to attend her. Then, in the remaining boats, followed the officers of lower rank, together with the baggage and the supplies.

“ On each of our galleys we found a bed-chamber and a second apartment, luxuriously elegant, furnished with a comfortable sofa, a commodious bed, hung with Chinese silk, and a mahogany writing-desk. On each galley there was a band of musicians ; and a fleet of small boats hovered unceasingly about the squadron, which looked like a creation of fairyland.

“ An immense concourse of people greeted the Empress with ringing cheers when they heard the guns fire their salutes and saw the sailors rhythmically strike the waters of the Dnieper with their gaudily painted oars. On the banks stood excited crowds, assembled from every corner of the Empire to admire the progress and offer the productions of their various climes in tribute to their sovereign.”

So M. de Ségur writes ; and the Prince de Ligne, expressing his enthusiasm with characteristic emphasis, adds supplementary details—

“ Cleopatra’s fleet left Kief as soon as a general cannonading informed us that the ice of the Dnieper had broken up. If anyone had asked, on seeing us embark on our barges,

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great and small, to the number of eighty, with combined crews of three thousand men, 'What the devil we were going to do in those galleys ?' we should have answered, 'Amuse ourselves, and—*Vogue la galère !*' for never was there a voyage so brilliant and so agreeable. Our chambers are furnished with Chinese silk and divans ; and when any of those who, like myself, accompany the Empress leaves or returns to his galley, at least twelve musicians whom we have on board celebrate the event. But sometimes there is a little danger at night in returning after supping on Her Majesty's galley, because we have to ascend the Dnieper, often against the wind, in a small boat. In fact, one night there was a tempest, in order that we might have all experiences, and two or three galleys grounded on a sandbank."

But tempests were few and far between. The weather, in the main, had the fresh, inspiring charm of spring. There was no more ice in the intercourse of the picnicking companions than on the river, and the conversation sparkled like the sun—

" We drew parallels," writes M. de Ségur, " between ancient and modern times, comparing France to Attica, England to Carthage, Prussia to Macedonia, and Catherine's Empire to that of Cyrus. Then we told stories, both old and new ; the Empress herself entertaining us with several anecdotes about Peter the Great and Elizabeth."

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And then, from time to time, Catherine practised modesty and self-depreciation—

“ Ah yes ! ” she said. “ I know you rather like me. The general effect of me pleases you. But I’d be willing to wager that, when you go into details, you find it easy enough to pull me to pieces. I don’t talk grammatically, and my spelling is something shocking. M. de Ségur knows what a wooden-headed creature I am. He gave me lessons in poetry, and I couldn’t learn to write half a dozen lines of it. In spite of all his compliments, I’m quite sure that, if I were a private individual living in France, your brilliant Parisian ladies wouldn’t think me fit to ask to supper.”

And so on and so forth, fishing for compliments, and never failing to catch them—being told that, if she had been born a man, she would have been, a great diplomatist, according to FitzHerbert, a great legislator, according to Cobentzel, and a great soldier, according to Ségur. One can imagine no more piquant talk for such a hostess, doing the honours of such an Empire ; and it was always the Ambassadors and the Prince de Ligne who kept the ball rolling and carried off the honour of repartee, to the exclusion alike of Potemkin and of Mamonof. The former was always in the background, occupied with stage - management and ulterior designs—and also with the game

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of chess and certain love affairs of his own, of which we will speak in their proper place. The latter was in the foreground, sharing a state-room with the Empress on her galley ; but his place at the daily social reunions was purely ornamental. He embellished the intimate dinners, but contributed nothing to the feast of reason. He only flashes, for a moment, into the relation of the progress because he sulked, and gave an exhibition of jealousy, when the travellers arrived at Kanief, where Stanislas of Poland, whom we know as Poniatowski, was to be received in audience.

Poor Poniatowski ! Those who knew Catherine best had declared that, of all her lovers, he was the only one whom she had really loved. He had been her confidant, though not her colleague, when she overthrew her husband ; and gossip had once credited her with the intention of resigning her own throne to share the throne which she had given him. Instead of which, she had stripped him of a portion of his dominions, and was now to receive him almost as a stranger,—and at all events as a potentate reduced to the humble rank of a vassal, —with a new favourite installed in the place which had once been his. One need not be surprised that the Ambassadors were curious, and clustered round, to see how he and Mamonoff “ took it,” and whether they glared at each other, or smiled, or sighed.

CHAPTER XXV

Interview with Poniatowski—The Crimean Journey continued
—Return to St. Petersburg

OF a truth, Poniatowski's position was a hard one, and most men would have felt embarrassed in his place. She who had once loved him had despoiled him, and her diplomatic representatives had insulted him in his capital. The Russian Resident at Warsaw had actually put an affront on him in his own theatre, coming late to his box, and then insisting, in the royal presence, that the performance should be recommenced for his benefit, just as if he had been himself the King. Such memories as that had been superimposed upon his sentimental memories; and yet, the Prince de Ligne tells us, "he spent three months and three millions in waiting to see the Empress for three hours." The story of her life contains no more persuasive proof of her charm.

His coming, too, in spite of the waiting and the expense, was as informal as he could make it. He presented himself not as a potentate but as a friend, assuming an incognito as he stepped on to the barge sent to fetch him.

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“Gentlemen,” he said, with a smile and a flourish of his hat, “the King of Poland begs me to introduce Prince Poniatowski;” and then they rowed him to the imperial galley. The Ambassadors, as has been said, crowded round in order to see how he took it—and how Catherine and Mamonof took it; but they had little chance of noticing anything except that Mamonof sulked. Catherine withdrew with Poniatowski to her private cabin, and was closeted with him there for half an hour. The Ambassadors do not pretend to know what passed between them. They only observed that, when the interview was over, the Empress looked embarrassed, and the King melancholy.

One may guess that she begged his pardon, and blamed her Ministers and her royal and imperial cousins for what had happened—explaining that great Empires expanded in obedience to the laws of nature, and that even an Autocrat of All the Russias could not prevent water from flowing under the bridge. One may guess, too, that he believed her because he wished to believe—because he was not a King who set much store by his kingdom, but a sentimentalist to whom sentiment was the greatest thing in the world. His pleasure, no doubt, was a sad pleasure; and yet one feels sure that he would have been sorry to miss it, knowing that, in spite of Mamonof,—over whose head he may be supposed to have looked with polite indifference,—he would find grief luxurious in

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consecrating to Catherine yet another night of memories and sighs.

But their private talk soon ended, and they came out from the cabin ; and the rest was a comedy of compliments played to a gaping gallery. There was a great banquet ; and when the party broke up, the Empress took the King's hat from the attendant who was holding it for him, and gave it to him with her own hands. " Twice to cover my head ! " he exclaimed, with a gallant allusion to his crown. " Ah, madam ! this is heaping too many benefits, too many claims to gratitude, upon me." And then there was another display of fireworks. " A representation of Vesuvius," says the Prince de Ligne, " lasting the whole night that we lay at anchor, lighted up the mountains, the plains, and the river better than the brightest sun at midday, or, I should say, kindling all nature to a blaze. We did not know that it was night." And then the dawn broke, and Poniatowski took his sensibility and melancholy back to Poland, and the travellers resumed the progress, which Potemkin continued to stage-manage with the same industrious ingenuity as before.

Stage-manage is, indeed, the word ; for many of the glories of the Empire which the stage-manager pointed out to the party were " properties " in the narrow theatrical sense. He wished to give his Empress the impression that her country was populous and prosperous,

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and he did so. The villages which he indicated on the distant horizon were "property" villages of painted canvas. The villages on the banks of the river were improvised villages, inhabited by temporary villagers, who, as soon as the party had passed, were driven round by a circuitous route to figure as the flourishing and contented inhabitants of another village farther on the way. Even the roads, where the progress was by land, were expressly made for the purpose of the journey—and so badly made as practically to cease to exist as soon as they had served their purpose; while the shops in the towns were stocked with merchandise commandeered from other shops elsewhere—supplied on credit, but never to be returned or paid for. In some places, too, a false appearance of plenty was given by a display of bags of sand which were passed off as sacks of wheat.

Similarly at Kherson. Potemkin had prepared Catherine a throne there at a cost of forty thousand roubles; but the palaces in which she was lodged, there and in the neighbourhood, were only finished just in time for her arrival, and allowed to fall into ruins immediately after her departure. She found gardens, too, which had been wildernesses a few weeks before, and would be wildernesses again a few weeks later; and she was driven past "property" country seats; and she saw "supers," habited as merchants, making be-

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lieve to drive a roaring trade in goods brought, to delude her, from Warsaw and Moscow ; while, at Sebastopol, she was invited to review an imaginary fleet, composed of superannuated merchant vessels, rigged and equipped to look like men-of-war. Potemkin, in short, acted throughout on the maxim : *Imperatrix vult decipi—decipiatur.*

So far as she was concerned, the deception was complete. There were those who saw through it ; but Catherine was not one of them. Her commander-in-chief surlily remarked, when blamed for some defect in the arrangements, that his business was to capture towns, not to dress their shop-windows ; but she did not take his meaning. Joseph II., when received at Kherson, drew the attention of M. de Ségur to the *mise-en-scène*, saying that it reminded him of the magical creations of the *Arabian Nights*, of a dream which vanished when the sleeper woke. Catherine woke, more or less, from her dream in the end, and discovered that her Empire had been almost reduced to bankruptcy in order to make a pleasant holiday for her ; but no one roused her from it at the moment. She reviewed troops and distributed decorations ; she launched ships and founded cities ; she gave banquets and was entertained by fireworks ; she drove under a triumphal arch inscribed : “ This way to Constantinople.” The peasants abased themselves in the dust before her, lying prostrate, with

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their noses on the ground, and not daring to look up till she had driven by ; and she was fully persuaded that all was for the best in the best of all possible Empires.

Joseph II. asked M. de Ségur what he thought of it all ; and the Ambassador made no secret of his impressions. “ There is a good deal more show than solid reality,” he said ; and he continued—

“ They begin everything here, but they never finish anything. Potemkin soon abandons the tasks which he initiates with such enthusiasm. None of his projects mature or are followed up. At Ekaterinaslav, he has laid the foundation stone of a capital which no one will ever inhabit ; and of a church, as large as St. Peter’s at Rome, in which, I dare say, no mass will ever be said. The site which he has chosen for the new city which is to be called after Catherine is a hill with a beautiful view, but without drinking water. Kherson, too, is badly placed, and has cost the lives of twenty thousand men. It is surrounded by pestilential marshes, and fully loaded vessels cannot enter the harbour. A vast amount of trouble has been taken to make everything look impressive while the Empress is here ; but all the marvels will disappear as soon as she has gone.”

To which the Emperor assented, with qualifications, adding that what puzzled him

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was that an Empress “so proud and so sensitive about her glory” should show herself so foolishly indulgent with “that spoiled child Mamonof.” She actually, he complained, allowed the preposterous young man to join her whist-party when she was entertaining “persons of dignity and importance.” Nor was that all—

“She even permitted the young idiot,” the Emperor grumbled, “to take the chalk with which these Russians mark the score and draw caricatures on the cloth; and she actually expected us all to sit still and wait till he had finished before going on with the game.”

But Joseph, nevertheless, as has been told, gave Mamonof a gold watch, and made him a Count of the Holy Roman Empire. He was far too pompous a potentate to find the Bohemian gaiety congenial. He thought of Mamonof much as a great lady thinks of the impudent barmaid or chorus-girl whom a nobleman of her acquaintance has been weak enough to marry. But he tried not to spoil sport more than he could help, and entered into the spirit of the conversation, to the best of his ability, by chaffing the Prince de Ligne about the gallantries of his youth: “Do you know, madam, that he was in love with my father’s mistress, and prevented me from succeeding with a marquise, lovely as an angel, who was the first passion of both of us?”

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That was his principal contribution to the merriment. Having made it—and having also talked politics which do not concern us—he gave Mamonof a gold watch, and withdrew to his own dominions. The others were merrier than ever after he had gone. Catherine invited them to play proverbs with her in her bedroom. She told them, for fun, to “tutoyer” her, and they called her “*ta Majesté*.” She asked them for stories; and more than one of them forgot his manners. M. de Ségur told a story which, he admits, was “just a little . . .”; and he was surprised to find that the Empress received it without a smile, and abruptly changed the subject. The Prince de Ligne got into still more serious trouble.

He had hidden behind bushes in order to spy upon some Mussulman women who were unveileding themselves to bathe; and, seeing that the Empress looked dull, he told her of his adventure, with the idea that it would cheer her up. But Catherine turned on him with severe indignation—

“Gentlemen,” she said, “this pleasantry is in very bad taste, and sets a very bad example. You are in the midst of a people conquered by my arms; and I propose that their laws, their religion, their morals, and their prejudices shall be respected. If I had been told this story without being told who was the hero of it, I should certainly not have suspected any of you. I should have concluded, rather, that

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some of my pages had been guilty of the escapade ; and I should have punished them severely."

The story is important as a proof that the tone of the Court was not quite what one might have been tempted to suppose. There are other stories, it is true, from which other inferences might be drawn. Potemkin, it is said, once paid his too ardent addresses to a lady-in-waiting, in the bedroom adjoining Catherine's ; and it is further related that Catherine, being aroused from her slumbers by the lady's screams, scolded the lady-in-waiting for disturbing her "for such a trifle." But that story may not be true ; and it is, at any rate, clear that Catherine, even when she flaunted her favourites in the public eye, considered certain kinds of decorum essential to her dignity.

She sometimes liked horse-play and buffoonery. Potemkin, as has been related, first attracted her favourable attention through his talents as a low comedian. The Grand Equerry, Narishkin, was a lower comedian than Potemkin, and without his brains ; but there was no courtier whose company she found more agreeable. His chief feat during the excursion under review was to spin a top on the table at which the royal party was sitting. It was a top as big as a man's head, and it contained an explosive. It burst ; and the fragments flew into the faces of the diplomatists who were admiring it. If we could imagine the late Dan

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Leno, in the reign of the late Queen Victoria, playing such a practical joke at the expense of the late Lord Salisbury, at Osborne or Balmoral, the analogy would help us.

Decidedly Catherine was a hoyden at her hours, and still had hoydenish moods at the age of fifty-eight ; but she had one way of unbending with her favourites and another way of unbending with her friends. Provocative pictures —nude Cupids and the like—stimulated her imagination, and her favourite's imagination, in the alcove ; but she knew better than to imperil her dignity by loose talk—understanding that such talk levels social barriers in a way in which mere romping does not. Liberties could be taken with her, but not every kind of liberty, though she was quick to forgive a liberty for which proper apologies were offered ; and she had views of her own as to the limits within which, and the persons between whom, it was permissible to ignore the conventional code of morality.

She lived as she chose, and she saw no reason why Potemkin should not do the same. We shall note, in a moment, the latitude which Potemkin allowed himself in this respect—the contemptuous disregard which he showed for the forbidden degrees of the Church which had so nearly had him for one of its monks. Here it suffices to note his obliging anxiety to help M. de Ségur to divert himself. The Ambassador, admiring the beauty of a Circassian woman, remarked that she was the per-

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fect image of Mme de Sécur. "She pleases you?" said the Prince. "Very well. I happen to know that she is for sale; so I will buy her and give her to you." And when M. de Sécur declined his offer, he attributed his refusal, not to moral scruples, but to false shame, and a reluctance to lie under so great an obligation to him: a point of view which contrasts glaringly with some acts of severity ascribed to Catherine, who required the recall of a British Ambassador—Sir George Macartney—because he had overstepped the boundaries of circumspection in his relations with one of the maids-of-honour.

But that is a digression; and we must revert to the relation of the journey. The return was by way of Pultava and Moscow; and we will take our glimpses of the spectacle from the pages of the Prince de Ligne—

"For the last two months," he writes, "I have been throwing money out of window. . . . I have already distributed some millions, and this is how it is done. Beside me, in the carriage, is a great green bag, like the one you will put your prayer-books in when you become devout. This bag is filled with imperials—coins of four ducats. The inhabitants of the villages and those from ten, fifteen, and twenty leagues round line our route to see the Empress, and this is how they see her. A good quarter of an hour before she passes, they

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lie down flat on their stomachs and do not rise for a quarter of an hour after we have passed. 'Tis on their backs and on their heads, kissing the earth, that I shower a rain of gold while passing at full gallop, and this usually happens ten times a day. My hands are soiled with my beneficence. I have become the Grand Almoner of All the Russias. He of France throws money also through his window, but it is his own."

There follows a comment on the stage-management—

"I know very well how much of it is trickery: for example, the Empress, who cannot rush about on foot as we do, is made to believe that certain towns for which she has given money are finished; whereas they are towns without streets, streets without houses, and houses without roofs, doors, or windows. Nothing is shown to the Empress but shops well built of stone, colonnades of the palaces of Governors-General, to forty-two of which she has presented silver services of a hundred covers."

The writer adds, in another letter, that, wherever the imperial travellers banqueted, they invariably brought their own table linen, and as regularly left it behind—for the benefit of one knows not whom. He goes on to tell us that "all the carriages are filled with peaches and oranges, and our valets are drunk with

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champagne"; but then, at Moscow, his tone suddenly changes. Catherine had never been popular at Moscow. "There may," she said, "have been misunderstandings;" and Moscow, at any rate, had been the nursery of some intrigues against her, and was the place of residence of discarded functionaries and favourites—"fine ruins," as the Prince commented, when some of them were presented to him, and he was asked what he thought of them. Moreover, at Moscow Catherine learnt the truth—or at least a portion of it: learnt, that is to say, that her Empire had a seamy side which had not been shown to her—

"Alexis Orlof had the courage to tell Her Imperial Majesty that famine had appeared in several of the provinces. The fêtes were stopped. Beneficence displaced magnificence. Luxury yielded to necessity. No more money was thrown; it was now distributed. The torrents of champagne ceased flowing; thousands of bread-carts succeeded the boat-loads of oranges. A cloud obscured, for a moment, the august and serene brow of Catherine the Great: she shut herself up with two of her Ministers, and only recovered her gaiety as she got into the carriage."

And so back, at last, to St. Petersburg, where the reign of Mamonof, of whom we have found so little to say, was presently to come to an end.

CHAPTER XXVI

Retirement of Mamonof and Accession of Plato Zubov

IN the story of the deposition of Mamonof, human nature once more flashes out amid the splendid artificialities of Court life. It reads like a play ; and a play has in fact been made of it—a piece called *The Favourites*, written by Mme Birch-Pfeiffer, produced at Berlin in 1831, and suppressed in consequence of remonstrances from the Russian Embassy. There was hardly any need for the author to alter, supplement, or embellish the facts, as we get them presented in Catherine's own letters and authentic contemporary memoirs. The theme, albeit with a variation or two, is the old one : May mated with December, and tiring of the union ; December more ardent than May, and unable to understand, until a sudden revelation lets in the light, why May is so sad and irresponsible.

Catherine, when the crisis came, was over sixty, and Mamonof was approximately thirty. She had enriched him, and ennobled him, and made much of him ; she had paid his debts

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with a lavish hand, even when the Treasury was at its emptiest ; so far as she could see, he had nothing whatever to complain of. But the caged bird always longs for freedom, however gaudily the cage is gilded ; and May mated to December is always longing to turn back and throw the handkerchief to April. Mamonof, in short, had little to complain of except that Catherine had passed her sixtieth birthday before he had passed his thirtieth ; but that was a sufficient cause of discontent : the more so as he was expected always to be on duty—always to be dancing attendance.

He would probably have said that Catherine was “well enough”—a charming woman to know on the terms on which Ségur, and Fitz-Herbert, and Cobentzel, and the Prince de Ligne knew her ; but he knew her, and was known to know her, on quite other terms. She made him ridiculous—more and more ridiculous as the years went by ; and ridicule is fatal to romance. He had never had the nerve, or the cynicism, to exploit his relations with her—he had only been weak ; and he grew tired of wasting the best years of his life as an old woman’s darling. He wanted an adventure in which his heart should be engaged. His feelings were reflected in his manner, and Catherine had to take notice.

Jealousy was the card she played—not displaying jealousy, but trying to arouse it.

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She named names, and threw out dark hints. There was a certain Kazarinof—there might be others. If Mamonof imagined that he was the only man in the world who . . . etc. . . . But when a woman of sixty talks like that, one knows that her heart is more uneasy than capricious. If Catherine had really had a fresh caprice, she would have acted on it with as little ceremony as usual. Mamonof would have received notice that his place was filled, and that his retiring allowance would be—whatever she chose to fix, though something very liberal, we may be sure. As it was, her lover sulked, and feigned illness ; and the overtures for reconciliation came from her. But she had her suspicions ; and she confided them to her secretary Chrapowicki—

“Have you heard what has been going on ?”

“Yes, madam.”

“I have been suspecting it for a whole eight months. He kept away from everybody ; he avoided even me. He said he had heart trouble, and couldn’t leave his room. Then he said that he was troubled by scruples of conscience, and could not go on living with me as he had done. The traitor ! He loved another, and his duplicity kept him dumb. If his passion had really mastered him, why couldn’t he speak out and say so ? You cannot imagine what I have suffered.”

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It seems amazing that an Empress of sixty should have talked like that to her political secretary ; but we have to do with facts. The report of her speech is taken from Chrapowicki's *Diary*. She went on to tell her queerly chosen confidant how, after suspecting a portion of the truth, she had dragged the whole of it to light.

Mamonof's sulks and indifference had set her thinking. An idea had occurred to her, and she had resolved to bring matters to a head. Since her lover was tired of the gilded cage, he should leave it. She herself would show him out, and arrange his destiny after his retreat—or, at all events, she would propose to do so, and see what he said.

“ I wrote him a note suggesting that he had better retire, and showing him how he could do so with brilliant prospects. I had an idea of arranging a marriage for him with the daughter of Countess Bruce. She is only thirteen ; but I know that she is already a woman, fully grown.”

One can only guess what was at the back of Catherine's brain : whether she expected Mamonof to accept or to refuse ; whether she wished to take the initiative in a separation which she realised to be inevitable, or looked forward and saw herself as the child-wife's successful rival. Evidently, she was in a

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desperate mood, and ready for desperate measures. Whatever she expected, it did not happen ; for Mamonof had a surprise in store for her—

“ Thereupon, he ran to me and, in trembling accents, confessed that he was in love with the little Cherbatof, and had been engaged to be married to her for the last six months. Picture my feelings ! ”

They are not hard to picture. The *spretæ injuria formæ* is doubtless as painful on a throne as in humbler stations of life. Mamonof was the third lover—the third, if not the fourth—who had inflicted the affront. And Catherine was sixty-two—an age at which every moment is precious and no time can be wasted. She must make haste to play her part, making it appear to the world that she had willed the separation which she could not avoid. Already she had made her choice ; now she confirmed it ; and the secretary perceived for what reason she had called him into her counsel and wept over her griefs to him.

She was giving him audience in her bed-chamber ; and she now handed him a ring, and a bag containing notes for ten thousand roubles. The bag was to be placed under the pillow of the bed which was, as it were, the Downing Street of Favourites ; the ring was to be handed to young Plato Zubof, aged twenty-two. “ He is

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a young man of good manners," wrote Bezborodko to Vorontsof, "but of very poor intelligence. I don't think he will hold his place long." He was to hold it, in fact, as long as there was such a place to be held by any man ; he was to exploit it as Mamonof could not, and to triumph over ridicule by his immeasurable insolence. But of that presently. The story of the parting from Mamonof has to be finished before we come to it.

A barbarous story has been told of Catherine's vengeance. Six men, disguised as women, burst, it is said, into the bridal chamber, stripped the bride of her nightdress, and birched her in the bridegroom's presence, saying, when they had finished the infliction of the discipline, "This is the way the Empress punishes a first indiscretion. For the second, people are sent to Siberia." That anecdote, however, though in keeping with Russian manners and customs, is not in keeping with what we know of Catherine, or with what we know of the facts of this particular case. If the thing was done at all, it must have been done without her knowledge,—at the instance, possibly, of Mamonof's insolent successor,—and even that is improbable. Catherine was very feminine, but she was not a Fury ; and there is no record of her having ever punished an infidelity otherwise than by reprisals.

Her rival, being one of her maids-of-honour, was married from the Palace ; and

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Catherine herself, according to the custom, helped to dress her for the ceremony. The story that she contrived to make her scream by running a large pin into her in the process may or may not be true. It is not a serious matter, and would indicate pique rather than rancour. The wedding presents, at any rate, were on a generous scale. It was intimated to Mamono^f that he must leave St. Petersburg and live at Moscow among the “magnificent ruins” remarked in that city by the Prince de Ligne; but he was given a hundred thousand roubles and three thousand serfs. Moreover, Catherine continued to correspond with him; and, both before and after the installation of Zubof in his place, she caressed the belief that, in spite of appearances, he loved her still.

“Every one is amazed,” the secretary ventured to say, “that your Majesty should have consented to the marriage.”

“God be with them,” Catherine replied. “I hope they will be happy. But, observe. I have forgiven them. I have authorised their union. They ought to be in a perfect ecstasy of delight. But they are not. I have seen them both in tears. His old affection for me is not dead. For the last week, I have observed his eyes following me wherever I go. Strange, isn’t it?”

Perhaps it was not so strange. Most likely Catherine had misread the meaning of the signs

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which she had observed. Most likely what she took for tenderness was really nervousness and apprehension. But the touch is very feminine—very full of human nature. It marks the great difference between the amours of Catherine and those of Louis xv.—the difference, in fact, between sentiment and sensuality. There is another feminine touch in the letter written to Grimm soon after Mamonof's departure. Catherine, we now see, is not angry with Mamonof, but sorry for him because he has gained no adequate compensation for the tenderness which he has lost—

“ The pupil of Mlle Cardel, having found Master Red Coat more worthy of her pity than of her indignation, and believing that he will be terribly punished as long as he lives by an absurd passion which has made people laugh at him and denounce him as ungrateful, has made all possible haste to wind the matter up, to the satisfaction of every one concerned. There is every reason to believe that he and his wife are not getting on very well together.”

We can lay our fingers on one of the reasons, and very possibly it was the only one. It appears in a letter which Mamonof wrote to Catherine in December 1792. He was unhappy, he said. It pained him to be separated from her. She had been very good to him, but—might he not return to St. Petersburg in order to be near her ?

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Catherine was delighted, and not in the least surprised. "You see. He is unhappy. I knew he would be," she said to the secretary, who had placed the bag of roubles under Zubof's pillow. It was no part of that young man's business to contradict her; but her biographer may nevertheless have his doubts, and suspect that the appeal was the bitter cry not of the lover but of the exile. Moscow was dull, and Mamonof sighed for the livelier excitements of St. Petersburg. He wanted a passport, and this was the way of asking for it most likely to meet with a favourable response. One gathers from the sequel that the request was only half-hearted after all.

There was a feminine touch of hesitation in Catherine's reply. She neither consented nor refused—she procrastinated. Mamonof should come to see her some day—next year, perhaps, if she did not change her mind—but not at present. There were reasons—the principal reason, no doubt, was young Zubof; but she took the tone, at sixty-three, of a woman sure of her lover, but afraid of her own weakness. "To stroll in the garden with him for an hour or two—that would be well enough," she said to Chrapowicki; "but to have him always with me—that is another matter altogether." So she put him off, and told him to spend another year among the "ruins."

At the end of the year she beckoned; but though she had not changed her mind, Mamonof

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had changed his. He would not come, and one can guess his reasons. Zubof had had time to show himself strong as well as unscrupulous and insolent; and Mamonof had no desire to make himself ridiculous. He had plenty of roubles and adequate estates; and he preferred a quiet life, even at the cost of permanent exclusion from the capital.

So Zubof reigned in his stead, and reigned far more completely. Mamonof had been Potemkin's docile nominee; but Zubof was Potemkin's formidable rival—undermining his influence and threatening his overthrow. All through the years which we have been passing under review, Potemkin had been ruling Russia, either through Catherine's favourites or over their heads; and we will return to Potemkin before filling up the picture of Zubof's ascendancy.

CHAPTER XXVII

Zubof and Potemkin—The great Stage-Managers of Catherine's Empire—Particularities of Potemkin's Private Life

POTEMKIN is, of all the men of Catherine's reign, the hardest to believe in—and that though one can collect more information about him than about any of the others. Judging him by results, we are bound to pronounce him a man of genius; but that phrase is vague—a formula rather than a picture. It still leaves the Western mind wondering how such results could have been achieved by such a man: a man whose personal eccentricities and apparent slackness, superimposed upon the eccentricities of the Slav, impress one as a Pelion of absurdity heaped upon an Ossa of barbarism. His Western contemporaries were agreed that he would have come to no good in any Western State. M. de Ségur says as much in so many words. But M. de Ségur also admits that, in Russia, he was marvellous. Let us glance back, even at the risk of repetition, and see how his career differed from the careers of the men who preceded and succeeded him in Catherine's gilded cage.

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To begin with, he started with an unfavourable handicap, being the least prepossessing of the suitors. As a rule, Catherine chose her lovers not for their intelligence but for their good looks; and Potemkin was ugly—an unkempt giant, of brusque, uncourtly manners,—with only one eye, and a squint in it,—ridiculed by the handsome Gregory Orloff as “ Cyclops.” Yet Catherine deposed an Adonis to make room for him—and did so at his instigation. He may not have been the only man who ever formally applied for the post of favourite. There is a story of an officer who once hid himself behind the curtains in Catherine’s bed-chamber in the hope of declaring his passion at an opportune moment in auspicious circumstances. That intruder, however, was turned out (if the story be true) and sent home to his mother, with a request that she would take better care of him for the future. Potemkin, as we have seen, asked for the position of “ general aide-de-camp”—much as another officer might have asked for a staff appointment—and got it. One may distinguish him, therefore, in the first place, as the favourite who imposed himself.

One may distinguish him, in the second place, as the favourite whose preferment was only a lower rung on the ladder of ambition. The others, having climbed so high, aspired to climb no higher. Having adorned the gilded cage, they were content, thereafter, to adorn private stations, living their own lives, with

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wives of their own choice, and plenty of money in their pockets. Potemkin looked beyond. He had been favourite but a short time when he aspired to be Emperor. When the question of his retirement was first raised, he talked of demanding the crown of Poland as the condition of his retreat ; and, in the end, he manœuvred himself into a position akin to that of Warwick the King-maker—the nominator of his own successors, strong enough to depose them when they crossed his path, and the real ruler of Russia in everything except the name.

And that for a period of some seventeen years, though his personal tenure of the office of favourite lasted for less than two years. The others came and went : Zavadovski, Zoritch, Korsakof, Lanskoi, Yermolof, Mamonof ; and throughout the reign of every one of them Potemkin continued to be the power behind the throne. When Yermolof intrigued against him, he flicked Yermolof away like an insect. Not until Zubof arose did he encounter a rival whose rivalry threatened to be formidable ; and that tussle was ended not by his defeat but by his death. And by that time, he was rich beyond the dreams of avarice,—the number of his roubles being computed at 50,000,000,—had achieved every distinction that it was in Catherine's power to bestow, and looked down not upon Russia only but upon Europe, from sublime heights of arrogance, like those heroes of Greek tragedy whom jealous Fate destroys.

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The Prince de Ligne asked him once whether he would like to be Hospodar of Moldavia and Wallachia. "Pooh!" he replied. "What sort of a position is that? Why, I could be King of Poland if I liked, and I have already declined to be Duke of Courland. The position I occupy is of more account than any of those." Another time, apropos of nothing, he said to one of the Engelharts, with the arrogant melancholy of the man who has earned his title to decide whether all is vanity or not—

"I wonder. Could a man be more fortunate than I have been? All my wishes have been fulfilled—all my desires gratified—as if by magic. I sought positions of great responsibility—I have held them. I wanted Orders—they have been showered upon me. I loved gambling—I have been privileged to lose incalculable sums. I liked to entertain—I have entertained magnificently. I wanted to buy land—I own as much land as a man could wish for. I wanted to build houses—I have been able to build palaces. I have always been fond of jewellery—no private individual in the world has such a collection of jewels as I have. In short, I have been overwhelmed with Fortune's favours."

He concluded the monologue by smashing a costly piece of porcelain and retiring to lock himself up in his room, as if disgusted with his surfeit of good things. One may cite the

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mood, as Mr. Belloc has cited the later moods of Louis xv., as an example of “the despair which follows the satisfaction of the flesh”; but one cannot charge him with magnifying his grandeur and glories. He only stated facts. He had really climbed to the pinnacle to which he pointed, and had kept his place on it; and he had done so without displaying conspicuous competence in his more important undertakings, and with complete disregard of the rules ordinarily laid down for the attainment of success in life. One cannot picture him walking by a straight path to a great end. The impression is rather of a man swaggering insolently to his goal by any road which it suits his whim to take—a Superman, in short, perfectly sure of himself, and therefore absolutely careless of criticism, indifferent to opinion, and as recklessly self-indulgent as the most unabashed voluptuary.

We have spoken of him as a great stage-manager. He sometimes reminds one of the late Sir Augustus Harris, who was also, in his way, a man of genius. If we could imagine the late Sir Augustus Harris entrusted with a task more proper to Lord Kitchener, tackling it with supreme self-confidence, not in Lord Kitchener’s way but in his own, conducting a campaign on the lines of a Drury Lane pantomime, and making at least a spectacular success of it, we should have a partially accurate portrait of him. But the portrait would only

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be partial. On the other hand, we have to think of Potemkin as a modern Russian analogue of Xerxes: a sort of self-made Xerxes, exaggerating the Persian monarch's sloth and love of pleasure, yet with an ample fund of latent energy, capable of rising to an occasion, and rushing from his headquarters in Capua to distinguish himself at the post of danger.

Stories of his insolent manners abound; but they generally end with some indication that he meant no harm, was only "off-handed," and bore no malice when his brusque manners were resented. Once, he invited the French Ambassador to dinner; and when the guest, as a matter of course, arrived in his uniform and decorations, the host slopped late into the room, and took his place at the head of the table in morning dress and slippered ease. But when M. de Ségur returned his invitation, and deliberately received him with an equal lack of ceremony, he laughed good-humouredly and admitted that the score was fair. On another occasion, he interrupted an audience which he was giving to M. de Ségur in order to converse with his tailor and other tradesmen, and the Ambassador withdrew indignantly, declining to leave any memorandum of requests so cavalierly received; but he afterwards learnt that Potemkin had carefully attended to the whole conversation, and taken instant steps to comply with his demands.

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Nor are stories less numerous of the luxury — not to say the debauchery — prevailing at his military headquarters. At his headquarters at Bender, for instance, in 1791, his establishment included five or six hundred domestic servants, two hundred musicians, a troupe of actors, and twenty jewellers. He even sent an invitation (though it was not accepted) to Mozart to join him, at a lavish salary, as pianist and musical director. Conceiving the desire to see the “*tzigane*” danced, and being informed that two officers in the army of the Caucasus danced it particularly well, he summoned them — a whole week’s journey — in order to give their performance, and recompensed them for their folly by promoting them to field rank. At another time, in the midst of some exciting operations of war, he dispatched two officers of his staff on fantastic errands: the one to fetch perfumes from Florence, and the other to buy jewels in Paris. We read, too, of fêtes given at his headquarters, at which every one of the two hundred ladies present was given a costly shawl, and invited to help herself from a crystal goblet filled with diamonds; while another graphic description of those headquarters runs as follows:—

“ There he sat, entirely given over to love, like a veritable Sultan in the midst of his harem. . . . The apartment was divided into two parts. In the outer room, the men played cards;

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while in the inner room, the Prince sat on a sofa with the ladies, turning his back on all of them except Princess Dolgoruki, whose place was close to the wall, and often appearing to forget that he was not alone with her."

It is related, too, that he hardly ever mounted a horse, but, when he visited the lines, drove round them in a carriage; and there is a story of his having sent an indignant message to the general commanding the artillery to inquire what he meant by making such a disgusting noise with his guns. Such proceedings, it will be agreed, do not, in a general way, conduce to military efficiency; but Potemkin was only relatively inefficient, and his luxurious indolence must have been largely affectation. Just as when giving audience to M. de Ségur, so when lounging on the sofa with the ladies, he was wider awake than he seemed to be. On the whole, he knew what was going on. He could wake up, and risk his life in the trenches without moving a muscle when cannon-balls mowed down the men to whom he was talking. He could order a victory, or the capture of a fortress, with no more ado than if he had been ordering a dinner—and he could take the credit, though Suvarof did the work.

Our completest picture of him at this period is from the graphic pen of the Prince de Ligne—

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“ I see the commander of an army, who seems to be lazy, and works without ceasing ; who has no desk but his knees, no comb but his fingers ; always in bed and never sleeping, day or night, because his ardour for his sovereign, whom he adores, incessantly agitates him. . . . Unhappy because so fortunate ; blasé about everything, easily disgusted ; morose, inconstant ; a profound philosopher, able minister, splendid politician, child of ten years old . . . with one hand giving proofs of his liking for women, with the other making signs of the cross ; his arms in crucifix at the feet of the Virgin, or round the necks of those who, thanks to him, have ceased to be virgins . . . ; gambling incessantly, or else never touching a card ; preferring to give rather than pay his debts ; enormously rich, yet without a penny . . . ; talking theology to his generals, and war to his archbishops ; never reading, but picking the brains of those with whom he talks, and contradicting them in order to learn more ; presenting the most brutal or the most pleasing aspect, manners the most repulsive or the most attractive ; with the mien of the proudest satrap of the Orient, or the cringing air of Louis XIV.’s courtiers . . . ; wanting all things like a child, able to go without everything like a great man ; sober with the air of a gourmand ; biting his nails, or munching apples or turnips, scolding or laughing, dissembling or swearing, playing or praying, singing or meditating . . . ;

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always in a shirt and no drawers, or else in a uniform embroidered on every seam; feet bare or in spangled slippers, without cap or hat (as I saw him once under fire); in a shabby dressing-gown or a splendid tunic, with his three stars, ribbons, and diamonds as big as my thumb round the portrait of the Empress, which always attracts the bullets; bent double, huddled up, when in his own room; tall, his nose in the air, proud, handsome, noble, majestic, or seductive when he shows himself to his army with the air of an Agamemnon amid the kings of Greece."

"What is his magic?" the Prince asks himself, and his answer to his question is: "Genius, and then genius, and again genius." No one else can say any more, unless it be to qualify and define the genius. It certainly cannot be defined, in his case, as the power of taking infinite pains. It was far rather the power of making a very little pains go a very long way; and it was, above everything, the power of an overwhelming personality—irresistible in spite of its limitations. Potemkin, in short, reminds one of a torrent, which does not always flow, but, when it does flow, sweeps all obstacles before it. Neither his mistakes nor his slackness—still less his excesses and dissolute levity—availed to impair his predominance. He ruled in Russia, without reference to these drawbacks, much as a grown

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person can assert ascendancy in a nursery, however eccentric his habits and however deplorable his morals. When he chose to fill the stage, there was no room on it for a rival, but only room for coadjutors.

One cannot leave him, however, without a further reference to those eccentric morals, which would have hampered his progress in any country but Russia, but there did him little harm in the eyes either of the Empress or of her subjects. He ignored the forbidden degrees, as if laws were not made for him. "Barinka is very ill," Catherine once wrote to him. "If your departure is the cause of her illness, you are very wrong. You will kill her." And Barinka was Barbe Engelhart—Potemkin's niece—one of five nieces to whom he successively made love, albeit making love to various other women at the same time.

Barbe was fickle and Potemkin was fickle too. Finding a love-letter, not in her handwriting, in the pocket of that dressing-gown of which we have heard so much, she married Prince Galitzin; but that was not the end. After the marriage, the quarrel was made up, and we find uncle and niece once more addressing each other in their correspondence as "my treasure" and "my life." But Potemkin was already making love to Alexandrine, who was the wife of Count Branicki; and he also paid his court, at undetermined dates, to Nadiejda, Catherine, and Tatiana; and then

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came his passion for his cousin's wife, Prascovia Potemkin, to whom he wrote (a brief extract from the communication will suffice)—

“ Come to me, my mistress ! Make haste, my love, my joy, my priceless treasure—the unparalleled gift which God Himself has given me. I only live for you, and all my life shall be spent in proving my devotion to you. Darling, darling, let me have the delight of seeing you again ; grant me the joy which I derive from the beauty of your face and your soul. With all tenderness I kiss your pretty little hands and your pretty little feet.”

But even Prascovia Potemkin had two rivals—two rivals, if not more : the lady who afterwards became notorious as Countess Potocka, and the beautiful Princess Dolgoruki. In this last case there was an angry husband to be dealt with ; but Potemkin dealt with him. He gripped him, when he remonstrated, by the cordons of the distinguished Orders which he wore, and roared at him in a voice of thunder, “ Miserable wretch ! I gave you these decorations, as I have given them to all those who wear them. You deserve them as little as the rest. You are dirt to me—one and all of you ; and I shall do what I like with you—and also with whatever belongs to you.” And he withdrew, with the Princess, to the scenes of splendid luxury thus described by Langeron—

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“The Prince,” Langeron writes, “had pulled down, during my absence, one of the apartments of the house he occupied, and had built a kiosk in which the treasures of two hemispheres were displayed for the temptation of the beauty he proposed to subject to his sway. Gold and silver glittered everywhere. On a sofa of rose and silver, fringed and embroidered with flowers and ribbons, one saw the Prince, in costly *négligé* attire, seated beside the object of his devotion, in the midst of a court of five or six women, whose jewels heightened their charms, and before whom fragrant incense was burnt in golden vessels. A cold collation, served in precious porcelain dishes, stood in the centre of the room.”

There we may leave the picture, remarking merely that such a lover as we have described was obviously the last man in the world to submit to the restrictions of Catherine’s gilded cage. As well might she have tried to catch a bear in a mouse-trap or keep a lion in an aviary. Naturally, being the man that he was, he was out of the cage almost as soon as he was confined in it; and he was not in the least like the bird whose only use for freedom is to spread its wings and fly away. On the contrary, he used his freedom openly, shamelessly, and aggressively, in the ways which we have seen—living his own life while he served the State; and Catherine acquiesced,

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and even applauded, as her letter about Barinka proves.

His devotion to her, however, survived his infidelity, though he insisted on showing it in his own way, and keeping it within the limits which he himself assigned. His determination that nothing should interfere with his polygamy was far firmer than her resolution that nothing should interfere with her polyandry ; and each of them came in the end to respect the expansiveness of the other's ardent nature. From time to time Potemkin still gives us the impression of courting Catherine—albeit only with the air of a gallant who neither proposes nor expects to be embarrassed by being taken too seriously. The rumour got abroad, and (though there is almost certainly no truth in it) has been repeated by responsible chroniclers, that she had secretly married him. The authorship is attributed to him of a passionate love-song in the vein of “ the desire of the moth for the star ” ; and his letters to her (and her letters to him) are often of lyric intensity—albeit written at a time when he was notoriously diverting himself with other women, and she with other men.

The psychological situation, in short, is far too complex to be analysed—one can only state the facts and leave the puzzle unresolved. One may fancy that Catherine regretted the one lover who assuredly would have been her master if they had met on equal terms ; over

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whom she had no superiority except the accidental one that she was a sovereign and he a subject; who could still dictate to her after he had ceased to be her lover, and never failed to do so with loyal zeal for her interests. One may attribute Potemkin's pessimism in the midst of his Sardanapalian revels to a secret hankering after the simpler satisfaction which he could, or believed that he could, have found in undivided and disinterested love. But one can say nothing confidently except that his nature and hers were alike complex; that their moods varied; that there is no escaping in either case from the impression of a multiple personality.

That said, we may leave Potemkin and pass on to Zubof—the only one of the later favourites who was not Potemkin's creature, and who, instead of accepting Potemkin as his patron and master, set himself, with an arrogance which excited remark even in Russia, to open the world, his oyster, with his own sword, and carve his way independently to the fortune of which he was ambitious.

CHAPTER XXVIII

Return of Potemkin to St. Petersburg—Rumours of his
Marriage to Catherine—His Death

It was in 1789 that Zubof stepped into the place left vacant by Mamonof's marriage. Catherine was now sixty—an age at which a woman necessarily feels that, if she still owes a debt to sentiment, she must pay it at once, or never pay it at all. So she made haste, as we have seen, enthroning a new favourite, with enthusiasm—or, at all events, with an affectation of enthusiasm: partly, one supposes, as a demonstration against Mamonof; partly to convince herself, as well as those about her, that her heart was as young as ever.

Potemkin received her confidences. “I have come back to life again,” she wrote to him, “as a frozen fly does when it thaws. I am, as you see, once more well and cheerful.” And she spoke of her new lover as “my child” and “my little darky,” and went on: “the amiability of his character makes me more amiable too.” The pleasant words were a challenge; for the rule that Potemkin must be consulted in these matters had now been broken for the first time

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for many years. But Potemkin made no move. Increasing years and riotous living had doubtless undermined his energy, though they had not impaired his self-confidence. He could not be troubled to make a fuss, assuming that, whenever he did rouse himself, he would be able to treat Zubof as he had treated Yermolof—flick him away, that is to say, as if he were some noxious insect. But that showed not only that he did not know Zubof, but even that he did not quite know Catherine.

Zubof, at twenty-two, appeared to most people merely a good-looking young blockhead—“well mannered but of limited intelligence,” wrote Bezborodko, already quoted; but that was a mistake. His amiability was only a means to an end—a mask temporarily covering the arrogance of an insufferable puppy; his strength lay neither in his amiability nor in his intellect, but in his will. He was sublimely unscrupulous and immovably obstinate; and he had a low cunning which was a serviceable substitute for talent. He knew what he wanted, and knew how to get it; he had audacity and nerve, and was not to be frightened from the course he meant to follow. Above all, he knew how to work upon an old woman’s weakness, and make that weakness a buckler against his enemies.

And Catherine, on her part, was at once weak and strong, being in love with love, and knowing that, at her age, it was easier to lose love

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than to recover it. Zubof at least made love to her charmingly, and she was grateful. There exists a note in her handwriting in which she tells Zubof that she is so glad she “ pleased him last night.” She enjoyed being girlish like that ; and she could not be sure that another lover would accept her girlishness in the same gay and gallant spirit. Hence, inevitably, a disposition to fight hard against any attempt to rob her of what might be her very last chance of finding happiness in love. She might be lectured ; she might be laughed at ; but she would be firm. That, indubitably, was the sentiment behind which the last of her lovers was entrenched. The number of roubles amassed by him in his entrenchments is said to have been 3,500,000 ; and he was so little afraid of Potemkin that he set his brother Valerian as a spy to watch him at his headquarters with the army, and laid all manner of unfavourable reports before Catherine as to his extravagance and incapacity.

At last, however, in 1791, we see Potemkin roused from his apathy, and appearing in St. Petersburg ; and, for a moment, we see Catherine’s old enthusiasm for him revived—

“ To look at Marshal Potemkin,” she wrote to the Prince de Ligne, “ one would say that victories improve a man’s appearance. He has come to us from the army, beautiful as the day, blithe as a bird, bright as a star, wittier

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than ever, no longer biting his nails, but giving a series of entertainments, each more magnificent than its predecessor.”

It is to the period of these dazzling entertainments that gossip assigns the secret marriage. That Catherine may have consented to go through the ceremony is not absolutely unthinkable; and her Minister might have found some ground of satisfaction in such a secret assertion of his power over her, in spite of her relations with Zubof. It is not an ordinary attitude, but Potemkin was not an ordinary man; still, there is no positive evidence, and the probability is strong that, if the thing had actually happened, other evidence than that of irresponsible gossip would, by this time, have come to light. So it is safer to be sceptical, and we may quit the subject with a glance at the glittering splendours of the reception which Potemkin gave in Catherine’s honour on the eve of his return to the seat of war—

“ A whole month was consumed in preparations. Artists of all kinds were employed, whole warehouses emptied. Several hundred persons attended daily to rehearse the respective parts they were to perform, and each rehearsal was a kind of entertainment. . . .

“ The company began to assemble in masquerade dresses at six in the evening. When the carriage of the Empress approached,

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meat, drink, and clothes were profusely distributed among the populace assembled at the outer doors. The Prince handed the Empress from her coach. He was dressed in a scarlet coat, over which hung a long cloak of gold lace, ornamented with precious stones. He wore as many diamonds as a man can wear in his dress. His hat, in particular, was so loaded with them that he was obliged to have it carried by one of his aides-de-camp.

“On Her Majesty’s entering the hall of the palace, a beautiful symphony, performed by more than three hundred musicians, resounded from the lofty gallery to greet her appearance. Thence she proceeded to the principal saloon, attended by a brilliant concourse. Here she took her seat upon a kind of throne surrounded with transparencies decorated with appropriate mottoes and inscriptions. . . .

“The Grand Dukes Alexander and Constantine, at the head of the most beautiful young persons of the Court, danced a ballet. The dancers were forty-eight in number, all dressed uniformly in white, and wearing scarfs and girdles set with diamonds worth above ten millions of roubles. The music was taken from known songs analogous to the festivity; and the dance was interrupted with singing. The famous ballet-master, Le Picq, concluded the performance with a *pas seul* of his own composition.

“The company now passed into another saloon hung with the richest tapestry of the

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Gobelins, in the centre of which stood an artificial elephant, covered with emeralds and rubies. A richly dressed Persian acted as his guide. . . . After this spectacle several choruses were sung; country dances succeeded; and these were followed by a grand Asiatic procession, remarkable for the great diversity of the national dresses of the different nations subjected to the sceptre of the Empress.

“ Soon after, every room of the palace, brilliantly lighted up for the occasion, was thrown open to the amazed crowd. The whole palace seemed in a blaze; the garden was covered with sparkling stones. Numerous mirrors, crystal pyramids and globes reflected this magnificent spectacle in every direction. All the windows of the winter garden, which serve also for so many doors to pass into the summer garden, were hidden by shrubs and fruit-bearing trees, which appeared on fire; and while the eye contemplated this brilliant scene with a delicious rapture, the exquisite perfume of a variety of perfuming-pans, concealed behind flowers of all sorts, led the enchanted spectators to believe that it actually proceeded from their illuminated branches. . . .

“ When supper was announced, six hundred persons sat down to table. Potemkin stood behind the chair of the Empress, to wait upon Her Majesty; and he did not sit down before she repeatedly ordered him to be seated. Those of the company who could not find room at the

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table were entertained at the sideboards. The plate was all gold and silver. The most exquisite dishes were served up in rich vases ; the most delicious wines flowed in abundance from antique cups ; and the table was lighted by the most costly lustres of crystal. An astonishing number of footmen and domestics, in superb dresses, were eager to anticipate the wishes of the guests. Nothing, in short, that luxury could name was asked for in vain.

“Contrary to her general rule, the Empress stayed till one o’clock in the morning. She seemed afraid of disturbing the pleasure of her host. When she retired, numerous voices, accompanied by the most harmonious instruments, chanted a beautiful hymn to her praise. She was so affected that she turned round to Potemkin to express her satisfaction. The latter, overpowered by the strong feeling of what he owed to Her Majesty, fell on his knee, and, seizing her hand, bedewed it with tears. . . .”

So writes Potemkin’s German biographer. The description has been quoted almost in full partly because it is a description of the great man’s last conspicuous appearance in history, partly because it leaves us with a true and typical impression of him. He was great as a statesman, a puller of wires, and an organiser of victory ; greater still as an actor ; greatest of all as a stage-manager. Appearances were always more to him than realities. His life’s

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work, as we have seen, was to create the Pageant of Russia—his conquests were chiefly valuable to him as contributions to that Pageant. Handling resources comparable with those of Napoleon Bonaparte, he applied them to the purposes of Mr. Louis Napoleon Parker.

This last pageant was intended to be his greatest. It is no wonder that gossip saw a secret symbolism and significance in it, and surmised that it was not only a subject's act of homage to his sovereign, but also a bridegroom's feast to his bride. Gossip, it shall be repeated, was almost certainly in error; but the end was so near that the mistake matters little, and is hardly worth investigating.

Potemkin was but little over fifty, but his way of life had prematurely aged him. He returned to the seat of war, an invalid who could hardly bear the jolting of his carriage—a dying man, though he did not know it, and though no specific disease was diagnosed. Knowing what we know of the climates in which he had campaigned, we may suspect that malaria had weakened him, and that a recurrence of malaria was now his trouble; but the actual end was obviously hastened by his deliberate neglect of his health. “He dismissed his physicians,” says his biographer, “lived upon salt meat and raw turnips, and drank hot wines and spirituous liquors;” and there is other evidence to the same effect.

According to Bezborodko, he refused medi-

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cines, and insisted, when he was in a high fever, upon throwing his windows wide open, and dousing himself with iced water. According to Langeron, he committed even greater follies—

“ Prince Potemkin,” writes this last witness, “ destroyed himself. I have seen him, in a fit of fever, eat a ham, a salted goose, and three or four fowls, and drink kvas, klouvka, hydromel, and several bottles of various kinds of wine.”

That was at Jassy. At last he decided to leave Jassy for Okzakof, either because he hoped to benefit from the change of air, or perhaps, as his biographer suggests, “ with a view to expire on the theatre of his glory.” The rest may be told in his biographer’s words—

“ He set out on the 15th of October 1791, at three o’clock in the morning. Scarcely had he travelled a few versts when he could no longer bear the motion of his carriage. He alighted. A carpet was spread at the foot of a tree; on this he was placed. He had no longer strength to utter a word; he could only press the hand of his favourite niece, Countess Branicki, who was with him; and he expired in her arms.”

There are many accounts of the shock which Catherine felt at the news. It was, she told Grimm, “ like a blow from a sledge hammer.” Potemkin was “ my pupil, my friend, and well-

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nigh my idol." Genêt, the French Chargé d'Affaires, tells us she "fainted, and had to be bled"; Chrapowicki that she exclaimed, "I and the rest of us henceforward will be no more than snails that do not dare to thrust their horns out of their shells." Count Rostopchin writes that she paid all his debts, and the cost of the great entertainment which he had given her.

But the way was now clear for Zubov, for whom, pushing and obstinate and unscrupulous though he was, the obstacles might have been serious if Potemkin had lived to insist upon barring the path to him.

CHAPTER XXIX

The unconscionable Manners and Conduct of Plato Zubof

No credence can be given to the report that Potemkin's death was due to poison, and that Plato Zubof was the poisoner. To a man in a high fever, a surfeit of salt junk is quite as likely to be fatal as any medicated potion. We may safely take our stand on that fact without laying stress on the negative results of the autopsy. The circulation of the rumour merely reflects the general reluctance of the Russian mind to believe that any Russian of high station has died a natural death, and the particular impression, obviously widespread, that Zubof wished Potemkin out of the way. Zubof, in short, profited by an accident so advantageous to him that it was not readily accepted as an accident; and he now stepped into Potemkin's shoes, just as he had previously stepped into those of Mamonof. They were far too large for his feet; but he continued to wear them until the end of Catherine's reign.

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father: a provincial Vice-Governor, charged with the superintendence of certain State factories, and preferred, soon after his son's promotion, to the office of Procureur-General of the Senate. In the former capacity he was suspected of committing arson, in order to destroy ledgers the inspection of which would have shown him guilty of fraud; in the latter, his malversations were so scandalous as to disgust—or, at all events, to inconvenience—his son, who sent him back to a province in which the standard of probity was even lower than in the capital. The son's integrity, however, was on no higher level, though his privileged position protected him. It has already been stated that he was arrogant and unscrupulous; and it must be added that he was incompetent. His one virtue (if it be a virtue) was his nepotism. He fastened his family on the Russian Empire like a man applying leeches to the body politic; and his father was the only leech removed for sucking the blood too fast. A letter from Rostopchin to Simon Vorontsof shows what was thought of him by those in a position to judge, and, at the same time, shows how he imposed upon the Empress—

“ Count Zubof is everything here. No one's wishes but his are of any account. His power is as great as that formerly enjoyed by Prince Potemkin. But he is as careless and incapable as he always was, though the Empress con-

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tinually tells all and sundry that he is the greatest genius Russia has ever produced."

It was not solely the infatuation of an amorous old woman which made her boast thus of her lover's ability. She also thought of Zubof, as she had presumed to think of Potemkin, as her pupil ; and it was her whim to believe that all her pupils did credit to her instruction. "Never before," she wrote to Plato Zubof himself, "has a man of your years had your means and opportunities of rendering service to his country ;" and the favourite let her say so, and seized the opportunity of serving himself and his hungry relatives—notably his brother Valerian, whom Catherine called "a hero in every sense of the word" because he came too near a cannon-ball, and so lost one of his legs.

One can associate his name neither with any domestic reform nor with any honourable stroke of policy. "Follow the precedents," was his formula when referred to for instructions ; and the precedents were mostly bad ones. "Nitchivo" became the watchword ; the army lost its discipline ; the finances fell into disorder. An absurd and unsuccessful expedition to Persia stands to his discredit ; and the further partition of Poland, involving the deposition of Poniatowski, is attributed to his insistence. One may conjecture that the fact that Poniatowski had once been Catherine's



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lover weighed with him—he was the sort of man with whom such a fact would weigh.

Catherine was blind in the matter; and the flatterers surrounding her did not try to open her eyes. On the contrary, a member of the Senate, at a sitting of the Senate, praised Zubof at Potemkin's expense, setting forth that the former had annexed fertile and valuable provinces, whereas the conqueror of the Crimea had only added to the Empire "deserts infected with the plague"; while, at some public Conference or other, an orator eloquently declared that Plato Zubof was a far greater man than Plato the disciple of Socrates. And meanwhile Plato Zubof was stuffing his pockets with roubles—3,500,000 roubles, as we have already said—by all manner of nefarious methods.

His most usual method was what in China is called "the squeeze." Other favourites had contented themselves with exploiting Catherine's affection. They had asked her for roubles, and, in due course, they had found roubles under their pillows. Zubof also did that to some extent; but his chief anxiety was to exploit his influence. Everything passed through his hands, and some of it always stuck to them. No advancement, favour, or decoration could be obtained without his help; and he did not judge claims on their merits, but charged a price for the "pull," which varied according to the applicant's capacity for paying. And all that with an insolence beside which

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the insolence of Potemkin seems trivial and colourless.

Potemkin's insolence, after all, had been the insolence of the barbarian. It had been, in part, the insolence of the vain man conscious of great gifts and constitutionally incapable of suffering fools gladly. Underneath his bluntness, there had been a fundamental bonhomie. The rough crust could be broken by anyone who took him the right way—always excepting the husbands who refused to be complacent. We have seen how the Comte de Ségur and the Prince de Ligne contrived to break it. Though he was not popular, he had friends as well as enemies. The most significant fact about Zubof is that he only had enemies : that, in spite of the interested flattery bestowed upon him when he was powerful, no one spoke well of him after he had fallen, and none of the Private Diaries or Secret Memoirs of the time treat him otherwise than with loathing and contempt.

It is from these, of course, that we derive the picture of his insolence, which can only be summed up as the insolence of a puppy ; and we may borrow our first sketch from the pen of Prince Adam Czartoryski, who came to St. Petersburg from Poland, as a young man of five-and-twenty, in order to plead for the restitution of estates confiscated after the suppression of Kosciusko's rebellion. He was well received in Russian society, and what

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he saw there he saw with fresh, if not unprejudiced, eyes. The progress of his private affairs need not concern us ; but his impression of Catherine's way of life—and of the attitude of the Russian people towards that way of life—may serve to introduce the subject—

“ The prosperous reign of Catherine,” Prince Adam writes, “ had confirmed the servility of the Russian character, in spite of the penetration of the country by a few rays of European civilisation. Consequently the whole nation, whether of high or of low degree, showed themselves in no way scandalised by their sovereign's depraved morals, or by the murders ascribed to her. She could do whatever she liked. Her immorality was a holy thing—it occurred to no one to criticise her dissolute behaviour. All respected it, just as the heathen used to respect the crimes and obscenities of the gods of Olympus and the Cæsars of Rome.”

Prince Adam was persuaded, however, that the Empress, however licentious her personal life, was jealous of her reputation for justice. He placed his hopes on that, and, consulting his Russian friends, was informed that, before seeking to be presented to her, he must first attend the levee of her favourite. Zubof, he learnt, received visitors daily, on official business, at eleven o'clock, while he was engaged with his toilet. He went, with the rest, and found the

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street compact “with coaches and four and coaches and six, just as at the grand entrance of a theatre.” He was admitted, and found the antechamber crowded with courtiers—officers of high rank, important functionaries, provincial governors among them—each waiting his turn, and watching his chance to solicit the redress of his grievances or the satisfaction of his greed—

“ The ceremony was always the same—always as follows: The folding-doors were thrown open, and Zubof entered with slow and solemn deliberation, clad in a dressing-gown and little else. He saluted the courtiers and the suppliants with a stiff and almost imperceptible bow. They stood around him in a deferential semicircle, and he proceeded to dress. His valets approached him, to comb and powder his hair. While this was going on, one saw other suppliants enter. They too, if the Count happened to notice them, were greeted with a chilly bow ; and they were all on the *qui vive* to catch his eye. . . . We were all kept standing, and no one dared to breathe a word. It was in dumb show and in eloquent silence that each of us tried to recommend the care of his interests to the all-powerful favourite. If anyone did speak, it was only in reply to a remark addressed to him by the Count ; and that remark never had any bearing on the subject of his request. Often, indeed, the Count said nothing to any-one ; and I cannot remember that he offered

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anyone a seat, unless it was Field-Marshal Sol-tikof, who was the leading personage at the Court. Tutulmin, the despotic proconsul, the terror, at that date, of Podolia and Volhynia, though told to be seated, only dared to sit on the edge of the chair. . . .

“ While the favourite’s hair was being dressed, his secretary, Gribovski, handed him documents which required his signature ; and the suppliants told each other in whispers how much they had had to pay Gribovski, in order to gain his master’s ear. Gribovski, like Gil Blas, received them as haughtily as his master ; and when the process of hair-dressing was complete, and a few papers had been signed, the Count put on his uniform, or his morning coat, and withdrew to his apartments. All that was done with an air of insolent indifference intended to impress the audience as dignified gravity. There was nothing natural about it—it was all deliberate, and had been rehearsed. When the Count had gone, the suppliants descended to their carriages and drove away, some more some less dissatisfied with their reception.”

Very similar is the picture of the same scene sketched in the *Memoirs* of Langeron, who, however, adds a few graphic details : that Zubof commonly placed his feet on the dressing-table during the ceremony ; that he often sat with his back to the suppliants and inspected them with the help of a looking-glass ; that those whom he

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beckoned to draw near him bowed till they bent nearly double as they approached, and retired on tiptoe when they were dismissed ; that many of the suppliants attended the receptions for years without ever receiving a word of recognition. From another source we get a story of a general officer so servile in his manner that he did not venture to remonstrate or move when Zubof's pet monkey perched itself on his head. The picture of impertinent puppyism on the one hand and shameless self-abasement on the other could not be more complete.

Prince Adam, however, was one of the few on whom the favourite smiled. He gained his *entrée* at Court, and was given some minor Court appointment ; and to that fact we owe some further vivid glimpses at the last inglorious days of a great reign : a picture, for example, of Catherine herself in her old age—

“ She was an old woman, indeed, but still hale and vigorous, short rather than tall, and distinctly inclined to be fat. Her walk, her bearing, and her whole personality, however, were full of dignity. There were no brusque movements—her manner was serious and noble ; but she was like a river whose slow stream is strong enough to carry everything before it. Her face, wrinkled, but very expressive, bore witness to her pride and her desire to dominate. On her lips was an eternal smile, though, for those who remembered what she had done,

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this studied calm was a mask concealing violent passions and an inexorable will."

The last phrase, of course, reflects Polish animosity too obviously for importance to be attached to it ; but, that allowance made, the vignette is valuable ; and so are the more intimate pictures of Zubof which succeed it. We are shown Zubof entertaining his equals ; and our impression of his manners is as unpleasant as before. He invited them to be seated, indeed—he could not well do less ; but, for his own part, he lay, in negligent ease, at full length on a sofa—this even when he was entertaining Esterhazy and Cobentzel. And he dropped hints wherefrom it was inferred that, though Catherine was his mistress, he was in reality pining for love of Princess Elizabeth, the sixteen-year-old bride of the Grand Duke Alexander. Prince Adam's sketch of that pose must be given—

" People were amazed at his presuming to entertain this fancy under Catherine's very eyes ; but as for the young Grand Duchess, she took no notice of him whatsoever. His amorous fits, so far as one could see, generally came on after dinner, when we called upon him ; for then he did nothing but sigh as he lay on the sofa, with the melancholy air of a man whose heart is oppressed by the weight of a secret sorrow. Nothing could please him except the

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melancholy and voluptuous strains of the flute ; in short, he showed all the symptoms of a man badly in love. A few of his intimates apparently knew his secret ; at all events, they appeared to establish themselves on a footing of sympathy by knowing and pretending not to know. His attendants said that, when he visited Catherine, he left her as if overwhelmed with lassitude, and with an air of gloom which made them pity him. He used, at these times, to sprinkle himself with perfumes, and received his callers with a fatigued and sorrowful demeanour, which no one failed to remark. But he would not rest, representing that sleep robs us of a precious portion of our lives.”

Such was his pose, and we will leave him posing. Our next extract must be a note on the Sunday scene when the Empress, after taking part in public worship, passed her Court on her way back from the chapel to her apartments—

“ I am told that it was on the occasion of these church parades, which took place on every Sunday and every Saint’s Day, that the gallants of the barracks used to oil their hair and scent themselves, and put on their smartest uniforms, and stand in a row in the hope of attracting attention by their fine figures and manly beauty. It is said, too, that it was no unknown thing for one of them to succeed, though in our time Catherine was too old for that sort of thing.”

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Which is to say that, though Catherine might have rivals, Zubof had none. There follows this picture of Catherine's easy-going manners with her favourite, and her favourite's easy-going manners with her—

“Sleighting parties were organised. Catherine liked sometimes to drive out in this style in the morning ; and the gentlemen on duty had to take their sleighs and accompany her. On one of these occasions I saw Catherine *en déshabillé*, and Zubof quitting her apartment with the air of a man who was quite at home there, in his pelisse and Morocco leather boots ; but neither the actors in the scene nor the spectators of it seemed in the least embarrassed.”

And then, to complete the picture, this account of the evening diversions of the Court—

“The Empress sat at a card-table with Zubof and two other dignitaries. It was observed that the favourite paid little attention either to the game or to his sovereign, but continually turned his eyes towards the table at which the two Grand Duchesses and their husbands were playing ; and it was astonishing that the Empress never seemed to notice this, though everybody else in the room was much impressed by it. Anywhere but in the Empress's drawing-room, such evenings would have seemed insufferably tedious ; even there one was glad that they

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were not unduly prolonged. The Empress did not stay till supper-time, but left off playing early, and withdrew to her private suite. She bowed with dignity to the Princesses and the company; the folding-doors of her apartment opened; the Grand Dukes and the Grand Duchesses also withdrew. Then Zubof made a precisely similar bow, and followed the Empress to her apartments; the folding-doors closing behind them—a proceeding which struck some of us as rather singular."

Such were the typical scenes, and such were the central figures of the scenes, of those last years of Catherine's life, at which we must now take a further glance from another point of view.

CHAPTER XXX

Catherine's Family Life—Her Son and her Grandchildren

CATHERINE had long been a grandmother ; her grandchildren were now grown up. During the reign of Zubof she arranged their marriages, uniting the Grand Duke Alexander to Princess Elizabeth of Baden, the Grand Duke Constantine to a Princess of Saxe-Coburg. Little has been said in these pages about her family affections ; and little need be said. It is a characteristic of Catherine, of which we must make what we can, that the story of her personal life can be told with hardly a reference to such matters. The historian, of course, must take note of them ; but the biographer, when once he has related the circumstances of the birth of her son, finds his interest diverted into other channels and confined to them. Yet what inference to draw ? What blame to assign—and to whom ?

One may start safely with the statement that the obligations of family love were neither impressed upon Catherine by the example of her own parents nor encouraged in Russian imperial circles. We have seen her, when only a

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child, married to a husband whom she did not like, with little more ado than if she had been sold into slavery, to satisfy ambitions which, at the moment, were assuredly her parents' rather than her own. We have seen her introduced to a Court at which a drunken and dissolute Empress kept a relative in prison—not on account of any crime that he had committed, but for fear lest the factious should raise a rebellion in his name. We have also seen her forbidden by Elizabeth's Prime Minister to correspond with her own mother, and admonished by Elizabeth herself for wearing mourning for her own father for more than a week—for a week, said Elizabeth, was quite long enough to mourn for anyone except a king. These circumstances justify nothing, of course ; but they explain much.

Moreover, Catherine's husband turned out to be, as we have seen, not a better, but a very much worse husband than she had hoped for. Her union with him was barren, and he was unfaithful ; and an heir was wanted, and insidious suggestions were whispered in her ear. Duty, she was told, depended upon circumstances. Chastity was a very good virtue in its way, but there was a Higher Law. The Higher Law enjoined the production of an heir to the throne, by whatever means obtained. Parents and guardians would not inquire too closely into the means, provided the end were achieved. Young Soltikof was very handsome, very attractive, very much in love. If Catherine

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liked him, there really was no reason—and there need be no difficulty—provided, of course, that appearances were kept up, and no open scandal was caused. . . .

So Paul was born; and it is not only the historical student whose mind is clouded with a doubt concerning him. Catherine also had her uncertainties. For it is not only uncertain whether Peter was Paul's father—it is also uncertain whether Paul was Catherine's child. She bore a child, and it was taken away from her—whether the child subsequently put into her arms was the same child or a changeling, none can say. The whole story is a mystery, of a piece with the mysteries which so often envelop critical occurrences in Russia. One no more knows what really happened then in the palace than one knows what happened, at at other times, in the prisons.

It has been argued—notably by Masson—that Catherine's dislike of Paul is our best proof that Peter was Paul's father: that the mother instinctively visited the faults of the father on the child. It is conceivable; but it is just as likely that her prejudice against the child sprang out of a doubt as to its identity: a doubt confirmed, as the years passed, by the development of the child's disposition—its obvious lack of its supposed mother's talents, intellectual interests, and power to please. A bad start that: as unfavourable as it well could be to the strengthening of those domestic ties

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which make homes happy and families harmonious.

And the bad start soon had a bad sequel. Not only was Paul an unsatisfactory boy—stupid, morose, and unattractive ; he was also a boy whom Catherine was obliged, from the first, to regard as a possible rival—and a boy whom insidious courtiers taught, in his impressionable years, to think evil of his mother. The indispensable Panin, it will be remembered, had only collaborated in the revolution of 1762 with the idea of making Paul Emperor and Catherine Regent during his minority. He had been too fat to get his way. Catherine and the Orlofs had been too quick for him. But his proposal had not been forgotten. It continued to inspire intrigues, though the intrigues never came to anything. And Panin was Paul's tutor—and Paul, somehow or other, was taught to ask, What have they done with my father ?

He may be said to have grown up under the shadow of that terrible question, so embarrassing to those about him—hardly less embarrassing to Catherine, who had profited by the crime committed in the Ropscha prison, than to those who, without her knowledge, had stained their hands with blood to serve her cause. It became a fixed idea with him—a haunting obsession which still haunted him when he was called to the throne. It is said that he then exhumed his father's body and placed it on the throne. It is better accredited that he disinterred his

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father's skull, and had it laid on the altar, while the people sang a *Te Deum*. It is certain that he sent for Alexis Orlof, whom he persisted in regarding as his father's murderer, and compelled him to mount guard for two days beside his father's coffin.

Between such a son and such a mother affectionate and confidential relations could not conceivably subsist. There was no way out of the emotional tangle except for Catherine to go her way and let Paul go his—keeping, the while, a close eye and a tight hand on him to prevent him from making mischief. She did so; and not only their paths but also their characters diverged. Catherine saw to it that Paul was suitably educated and suitably married—for that was a political necessity. Since he had the same military tastes as Peter, she let him have soldiers of his own to drill—though never enough to be a possible source of danger to her; but he was never one of the pupils whom it delighted her to “form.” No opening was found for him either in civil or in military affairs. When he went to the Swedish war, the general was specially instructed to give him no information as to his plans; and he had to live with restricted liberty, an empty purse, and the fear before his eyes that, when the succession to the throne came to be settled, he would be passed over in favour of one of his own sons.

It was a hard case; and one would sympathise if one could find anything in his character

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responsive to sympathy: but that is how he differs from Catherine. She, at any rate, whatever her faults, knew how to charm her contemporaries; and a good deal of her charm still subsists in spite of the stiffening of the standards of morality in modern Courts. One still admires her daring, her intellectual alertness, her pride in her *petit ménage*, her patronage of the arts, her open-handed liberality, her refusal to bear malice when she was "treated badly," and her amiability when she put off the Autocrat at her hours of ease. These virtues still cover a multitude of shortcomings; and they cloaked those shortcomings even more effectually during her life. Of those who were privileged to see much of her, there was hardly one who did not "make allowances" and speak kindly. Lord Malmesbury, who took to St. Petersburg something uncommonly like a Non-conformist Conscience, is almost the sole exception to the rule.

Of Paul, on the other hand, it is almost equally exceptional to find anyone speaking well, unless it be when he is praised out of malice aforethought, as an indirect reflection on Catherine. The Chevalier de Corberon pictures him as an unlicked, but self-conscious, cub, ill at ease in his uniform, and always trying to remember how his dancing-master had taught him to hold himself. The typical anecdotes represent him as stupid, ill-tempered, boorishly and sullenly rude, and of an autocratic pride

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without parallel even in the most autocratic circles.

The view commonly taken of his mental endowments is best illustrated by an anecdote of a brief dialogue which passed between him and Zubof in Catherine's presence. "I agree with M. Zubof," said the Grand Duke, apropos of no matter what. "Eh ! You agree with me ? How's that ? Have I said something foolish ?" was the favourite's insolent rejoinder ; but in most of the stories it is the Grand Duke who figures as insolent. Baroness Oberkirch tells us, in her *Memoirs*, how he insulted Clerisseau, the architect, at Paris, when he was taking his grand tour. "Why do you refuse to speak to me, my lord ?" the architect ventured to ask him, when he was taken to see a building which was one of Clerisseau's masterpieces. "Because I have nothing to say to you, sir," Paul retorted ; and when Clerisseau protested that he should have to tell the Empress, with whom he was in correspondence, how he had been treated by her son : "Very well, sir," said Paul. "Tell her that you are blocking my way. I have no doubt she will be much obliged to you."

One could infer the relations of mother and son from that anecdote if one did not know it from other sources ; and one could draw an identical inference from the scraps of their correspondence which have been preserved —

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“MY DEAR MOTHER,—Your Imperial Majesty’s letter gave me great pleasure, and I beg your Imperial Majesty to accept my thanks, and at the same time to believe in the respect and attachment with which I sign myself . . .”

“MY DEAR SON,—I have received your letter of the fifth of this month, assuring me of your sentiments. My own sentiments are similar. Good-bye. I hope you will keep well.”

They had no more to say to each other than that, and they drifted farther and farther apart; and one can say little except that Catherine’s attitude partly explains Paul’s, and that Paul’s partly explains Catherine’s.

Most likely Paul was mad. If one believed that he was Peter’s son, one would say that he inherited Peter’s insanity and absurdity. As it is, one has to take him on his merits, and pronounce, after careful inquiry, that he had few. Living in terror of assassination, he behaved with the cruelty of cowards—inflicting the cruelty with the grotesque and capricious humour of a maniac. The story which best reveals him in a flash is that of his reply to the stranger who presumed to ask him who were the most important men in the Russian Empire. “Sir,” he answered, “there is no important man in the Russian Empire except the man to whom I am speaking, and he is only important as long as I am speaking to him.”

THE GRANDCHILDREN

One could supplement that anecdote with many stories of floggings, executions, and banishments ; but such matters belong to the record of his reign rather than of Catherine's. Enough to recall here the story of the officer who, for invidiously contrasting the two reigns, had his tongue cut out and was exiled to Siberia—and to note that these barbarities, being the barbarities of a weak man, made his ultimate doom inevitable : a palace revolution in favour of his son Alexander, with Zubov for one of the conspirators.

So that it must be granted that Catherine's estrangement from her son does not, in view of all the circumstances, stamp her as an unnatural mother. She was not at all sure that Paul was her son, and she was quite sure that he was not the sort of man she would have liked her son to be. But she was a woman of great emotional vivacity and expansiveness; and, the normal avenues of emotion being closed to her, she had to find other outlets for it.

At times, and to some extent, she found such outlets in her affection for her grandchildren—and in particular for the future Emperor Alexander. "I dote on him," she wrote to Grimm ; and she taught Alexander his alphabet, and let him bring his toys and play with her, and designed a frock for him of a new original pattern, which she exhibited with pride to the King of Sweden and the Prince of Prussia. She boasted, too, like any other grandmother,

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of his precocity, and, in particular, of his precocious sensibility. It was a proud moment when he ran crying to tell her that the poor sentinel outside the door was shivering with the cold ; a prouder moment still when she heard people say that he “ took after ” her in thus showing consideration for his inferiors ; the proudest moment of all when he stammered out that he would rather be like his grandmother than like his parents.

Whether the grandson who conceived the horrible idea of the Holy Alliance really derived much moral and spiritual inspiration from the grandmother who danced to the piping of eighteenth-century philosophers is another question, too large to be entered upon here. Religion, at any rate, cannot have been the link between them ; for Catherine was merely a rationalist who conformed in order that she might not shock, whereas Alexander was to become a superstitious mystic whom devout women wheedled. But no matter. The real point claiming notice is that there does exist some material—though not perhaps very much—for thinking of Catherine as a matron who found her truest happiness in the nursery : a grandmother of the Gracchi, saying with proud affection, “ These are my jewels.” A certain portion of her enthusiasm indubitably took that outlet.

The rest of it, as we have seen, was lavished on her favourites : first on dashing young soldiers like Soltikof and Andrew Czernichef ;

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then on Poniatowski, the Man of Feeling ; then on Gregory Orlof, the Strong Man who made a revolution for her ; finally on subalterns young enough to be her sons, some of them nonentities and others puppies, with no qualities beyond those of a barber's block to recommend them. In the case of a German woman, one naturally looks for a German word to describe the turmoil in her heart, and perhaps the word *schwärmerei* may be useful. It implies enthusiasm rather than passion ; and certainly enthusiasm rather than passion was the characteristic of Catherine's affections. She never passed, as the passionate do, from love to hatred, when passion ceased to be returned. Our impression is rather of enthusiasms dwindling, but leaving pleasant memories behind them, when other enthusiasms spring up to take their place.

It is true, of course, that her enthusiasms included rather more than the word *schwärmerei* commonly implies ; but that was almost inevitable in the circumstances in which she lived. She had the temperament of those to whom the Apostle of the Gentiles addressed his famous warning that "it is better to marry than to burn" ; but the dilemma did not present itself as a real one either to her or to any of her advisers. When she talked of marrying, her Senate, as we have seen, raised objections, but added that no objection would be taken to her distinguishing her subjects with her favours.

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Since she was thus forbidden to unite herself to any one of them by any permanent tie, there remained no reason other than her caprice for favouring one of them in preference to another, or for confining her favours to any single favourite. Nobody expected her so to confine them, and she did not ; but her amours never wronged a wife or broke up a home, though she ran the gamut of the emotions which she needed.

That need for emotion, indeed,—coupled with the fact that so many natural outlets of emotion were closed to her,—is the master key to any riddle which her character still seems to present. At heart she was as little Messalina as she was Semiramis, but a German *bourgeoise*, who required to exercise her heart as an athlete requires to exercise his limbs. She wanted the common lot, though she could not obtain it in the common way. In her own way she came to experience a good deal of it—its tears as well as its triumphs. Her heart, in short, was sincere, though it was also elastic, and, in the end, showed rather more elasticity than a sentimentalist can quite admire.

For Catherine did not, like George Sand, know how to grow old with dignity. Looking at the sentimental side of her life, one has to admit that she lingered too long on the stage, and in so lingering made herself ridiculous. There is no dignity whatever—there is nothing that is not sad or laughable—in the picture of those last years during which she let an in-

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sufferable young puppy fool her, while he robbed and insulted her subjects. That is the truth, and it must be told ; but there is no need for telling it with a wry face or a superior sneer. Catherine was a foolishly amorous old woman —there is no denying that. But she was the wreck of a woman who had been great, and, if better advised, might have been greater ; a woman whose circumstances had been as adverse to the formation of a fine character as circumstances well can be, and whose character had nevertheless preserved many elements of grace and grandeur ; a woman, therefore, whose final philanderings, unbecoming though they were, are a theme not for scorn and laughter, but for tears and pity.

And so to the closing scenes.

CHAPTER XXXI

Last Years and Death

ZUBOF'S arrogance continued unabated to the last. Perhaps he felt that arrogance—with the humility of courtiers for its complement—was a condition of self-respect in circumstances in which men, as a rule, do not respect themselves. To give it due prominence, one must add yet another sketch, taken from the Letters of Rostopchin, the Saint-Simon of his age and country—

“ You will be surprised to hear that General Melessino, when he received the Grand Cordon of the Order of Vladimir the other day from M. Zubof, actually kissed his hand. Moreover, there is here a Lieutenant-General Kutusof—he who was formerly Ambassador at Constantinople. What do you think that man does ? He comes an hour before Count Zubof rises, and makes his coffee for him, pretending that it is an art in which he possesses special skill ; and, in the presence of a crowd of people, he pours it out, and carries the cup to the favourite in his bed.”

LAST YEARS

At the same time, if we may believe Rostopchin,—and there is no particular reason why we should not,—the Empire of All the Russias, like the Empire of ancient Rome, was being destroyed by the prevalent corruption. The civilisation which Catherine had introduced had been something more than a veneer. She had imitated the West, whereas Peter the Great had only parodied it. Her ideals had been generous and elevated, and they had in part been carried out. She had tried to live up to the expectations of the French Encyclopædist ; she had in part succeeded. Her Court, in spite of Lord Malmesbury's opinion of it, had abandoned the orgies which of old distinguished it. Vice (if anyone insists upon the word) had lost, if not all its grossness, at least a noticeable proportion of it. Such revels as caused scandal at Potemkin's headquarters had not been included in the common round in Catherine's palaces. Machinery was in motion, and doing its work. There was visible, and indeed conspicuous, progress towards refinement, culture, tolerance, and education.

But the work was only begun, not finished. The machinery was not in such order that it could run by itself ; and the ruling classes of Russia, whose business it was to keep it running, were the people of whom it was justly said that they were “rotten before they were ripe.” So now, inevitably, as Catherine was growing old, there was reaction and reversion to type. She

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was reaching the age at which the arteries harden. The hardening of the arteries was to be the cause of her sudden death ; but we can also trace its effect in the stiffening of her ideas, her neglect of the duties of government, and her readiness, in the face of new conditions, to fall back upon old-fashioned, cast-iron prejudices.

The French Revolution is the touchstone ; her attitude towards it is the test. She had been the friend, and even the pupil, of the theorists whose ideas it put in practice ; but it baffled her, and made her angry—it may even be said to have set her scolding. She could not see that it was pregnant with the reforms for which she had professed enthusiasm—such reforms as no benevolent despot ever yet succeeded in bringing to birth. She only saw in it a suggestion that all autocrats must make haste to stand shoulder to shoulder, before evil overtook them. In that way, and to that extent, she did anticipate the idea of her grandson's Holy Alliance —albeit in the spirit of a scared old woman, and not of the perfervid mystic who believed that it was his divine mission to trample upon prostrate peoples.

It is intelligible. The abolition of feudal rights may well have frightened an Autocrat who was accustomed to give away serfs more freely than modern sovereigns give away scarf-pins. She could not be expected to see in such transactions the recommencement of the world's

LAST YEARS

great age, or the return of the golden years. Most likely she would still have taken the line she took if she had been in the hands of good advisers, and able conscientiously to lay her hand upon her heart and say that her own Empire, at any rate, stood in no need of revolution. As a matter of fact, she was in bad hands, and her Empire needed revolution badly.

Let us quote Rostopchin again—

“ You can have no idea how shockingly our men and their officers are behaving in Poland. They are the same men as before, but they have become heartless, and are more like highway robbers than soldiers. Have you heard of the atrocities which are being committed at Warsaw—wives torn from their husbands, and daughters from their fathers, and no complaints allowed ? The peasants pillaged till they are driven to despair—the nobles treated worse than their slaves ? Yesterday ninety thousand Polish peasants were distributed among seventy-two persons. Count Zubof took thirteen thousand of them—valued at a hundred thousand roubles a year—and Rumantzof and Suvorof took seven thousand each. . . .

“ In the Caucasus people are denouncing the atrocities perpetrated by General Paul Potemkin. The barbarities of the Spaniards in the New World, and of the English in the Indies, are nothing to those of our military philosopher, who spends part of his time in translating

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Rousseau's *Héloïse*, and the rest of it in executing all persons whose property excites his greed. They say he is sure to go unpunished because he is so rich."

It is impossible to say what Catherine knew of this—most likely she knew very little. Just as Potemkin had deceived her with his "property" villages and his stage armies of loyal and prosperous subjects, so Zubof may be supposed to have blinded her eyes to the corruption and cruelty which were going on by his pleasant manners and plausible tales of military glory. Moreover, she had other things to think about. Rostopchin adds something to a story which we have already glanced at in the pages of Adam Czartoryski—

"Some of her people threw out hints to her concerning her favourite's passion for the Grand Duchess Elizabeth. She caught them exchanging glances, and there was a scene. She sulked for a few days, and then made it up again; but she was very angry with old Count Stackelberg, whom she suspected of being in the confidence of the lovers; and she made herself so unpleasant to him that that aged courtier had to quit the Court."

So that, if Catherine found happiness in love at times, she certainly did not find it always; and her doubts of the sincerity of

ILLNESS OF CATHERINE

Zubof's affection were not her only trouble. She was also distressed by the failure of the marriage which she had planned between her granddaughter and the Prince of Sweden. The insuperable object there was the religious one. The Prince being a Swedenborgian, there was a difficulty about allowing his wife to worship publicly in Stockholm, according to the Orthodox rite. Somehow or other, the negotiations were bungled, and the match had to be broken off, after the date of the wedding had been fixed, in circumstances similar to those which sometimes come to light in a bad breach of promise case. "I leave you to imagine," Catherine wrote to her Ambassador at Stockholm, "how very indecent their behaviour has been."

She was upset, and the shock—helped, perhaps, by the shock which Zubof's conduct had brought about—affected her health. She was a woman of strong constitution, hardly ever known to be ill; but her arteries were hardening, and, when that happens, shocks are serious matters. Rostopchin notes her indisposition—

"Her state of health is unsatisfactory. She no longer walks. In the latter days of September she experienced a shock—was said to have been affected by a thunderstorm—a strange occurrence in this country, and unparalleled since the death of the Empress Elizabeth. She is keeping her room."

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No more than that. There were no obvious grounds for anxiety. The Court felt none ; and the gaieties of the Palace went on as usual. On the evening of 16th November Catherine spoke jestingly of death ; and on the morning of the 17th, she told the maid who called her that she had never slept better in her life. But a few hours later couriers were galloping in hot haste with news for Paul.

Paul was at Gatchina, which is half a day's journey from St. Petersburg,—despised, neglected, and practically exiled,—on bad terms with Catherine, and on worse terms with Zubof. “It is a point of pique with them,” writes Rostopchin, “to make clear to each other their respective positions as Grand Duke and subject ; but the subject is the great man and the Grand Duke is a nullity.” He continues—

“He is being treated even worse than usual. Last summer, for instance, when he wanted to go to Pavlovski, he was told that the journey would cost too much money, and that he must stop where he was. When one is a Grand Duke of Russia, and is forty-one years old, and is treated by one's future subjects as if one were a naughty boy, it is no wonder if one fumes with suppressed rage ; and that is what the Grand Duke is doing.”

And then (so the story goes), on the night of 16th November, Paul had a dream. It

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seemed to him that some invisible and supernatural force was laying hold of him and lifting him up to heaven. He fell asleep again ; but the same vision revisited him—an obsession which he could not shake off. He told the Grand Duchess, who was lying awake beside him, and learnt that her slumbers too had been broken by a precisely similar dream. They agreed that they had received some supernatural warning—whether of good or of evil they must wait to see.

They waited, wondering—fearful rather than hopeful ; and while they were taking their after-dinner coffee, the mystery was solved. Nicolas Zubof, one of the favourite's brothers, came riding up the avenue towards them. He dismounted, left his horse, and approached on foot ; and Paul turned pale. "It is all up with us—we are lost," he cried, assuming that this was the signal for his deportation ; but, a moment later, Nicolas was on his knees announcing that the Empress lay at the point of death—that no hopes of her recovery were entertained.

It was a little after three o'clock—and November days are short in Russia. A carriage was instantly ordered ; and the Grand Duke and Duchess drove off in the twilight. Nicolas Zubof had already ridden ahead, to arrange that fresh horses should be ready at every stage. Rostopchin met him on the road, drunk and blasphemous—threatening to harness the post-

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master himself to the carriage if the horses were not forthcoming promptly. Other messengers, only a little behind the first, were met upon the way, bringing the same news. The Grand Dukes Alexander and Constantine had sent couriers ; so had several of the Court officials ; so had even the Chief Cook and the Chief Fishmonger. Having delivered their messages, they turned and followed Paul's carriage. A swelling procession galloped along the St. Petersburg road in the moonlight, Paul saying the while to Rostopchin the things which it is proper for the heir to a great Empire to say at such an hour—

“Wait, my friend, wait ! I have lived forty-two years in the world. God has so far supported me. No doubt He will give me the strength and the ability to bear the burden which I am destined to assume. Let us place all our trust in His divine goodness.”

At half-past eight in the morning, they reached the Palace, and Paul heard exactly what had happened. Catherine had risen, and breakfasted, and adjourned to the room in which it was the custom for her secretaries and her ministers to attend her. They had waited to be summoned, and the summons had not come. Anxiety had at last been felt, and servants had been sent to make inquiries. They had knocked, and there had been no answer. They had waited a little longer, and then entered

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without knocking, and found their Empress lying unconscious on the floor ; and her physician had been fetched in haste.

“ Apoplexy,” he said. He would bleed her—he would apply blisters to her feet. But it was a bad case—there was little hope that the remedies would save her.

Nor did they. Once Catherine opened her eyes and spoke—but only to ask for water. Then to the struggle for life succeeded the agony of death ; the physicians kneeling by the bedside, and wiping the flecks of foam from the dying woman’s lips—her maid Marie bending over her, and sobbing as if her heart would break ; while, in an adjoining apartment, Paul and the ministers and the courtiers waited, anticipated, considered, and prepared—some of them hoping, some of them fearing, none of them certain what the imminent future would bring forth. For there were certain sealed papers—a ukase, perhaps—a will, no doubt—material, at any rate, for a trial of strength between the favourite and the heir. But Zubof’s nerve was failing him, while Paul’s was not—

“ I have never seen,” writes Rostopchin, “ anything resembling the favourite’s despair. By what emotion he was most violently agitated I cannot say ; but his premonition of his coming fall was depicted not only in his countenance, but in every movement that he made. As he crossed the Empress’s room, he stopped, again

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and again, before the body, and burst into a storm of sobs: . . . Let me tell you what I observed. As I entered the waiting-room, I saw Prince Zubof seated in a corner. The courtiers avoided him as if he were plague-stricken. Overcome with fatigue and thirst, he did not even dare to ask for something to drink. I sent a servant to him, and myself poured out the glass of water refused to him by those who, twenty-four hours previously, had depended for their fortunes on his smiles. This hall in which men had crowded to compete for the honour of a word from him was now, so far as he was concerned, a barren steppe."

So complete was the fall of the mighty; completer still when, in obedience to Paul's order, he fetched a sealed packet, and Paul, finding in it a ukase setting him aside from the succession, slowly tore it into tiny fragments. And then—the question of the succession thus rudely and autocratically settled—there was heard the strong voice of Count Samoilof making the announcement which at once summoned the Grand Duke to reign and doomed him to a violent death—

“ Gentlemen ! The Empress Catherine is dead, and His Majesty Paul Petrovitch has deigned to ascend the throne of All the Russias.”

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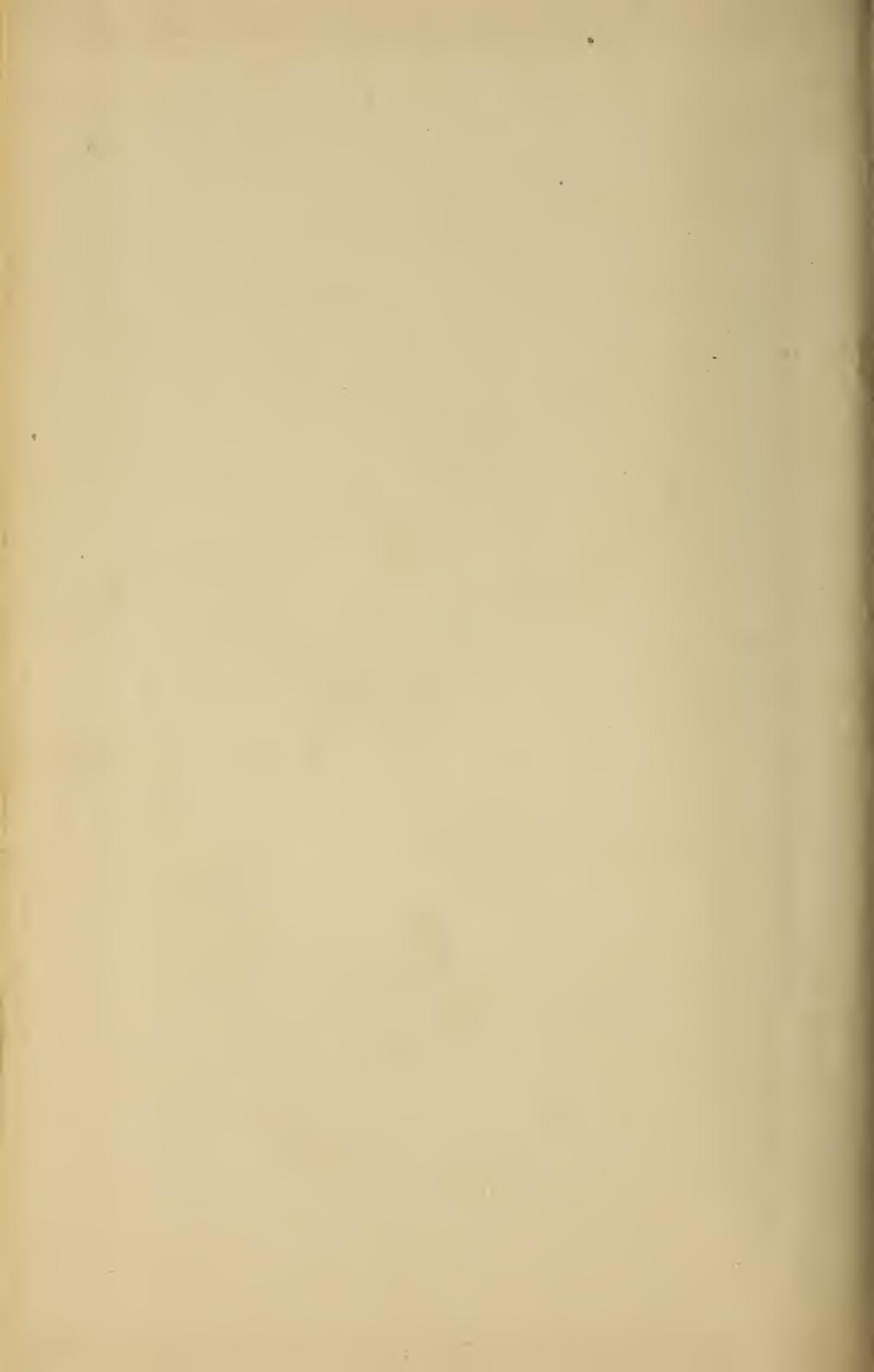
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